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IN MAREMMA

A Story

By OUIDA

'AMOR CH' A NULLO AMATO AMAR PERDONA'



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

London

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IN MAREMMA.

CHAPTER XXXV.

‘**W**HERE have you been?’ said Este with anger and with doubt, when she returned as the afternoon shadows grew into the gloom of evening, and the Ave Maria was tolled or rung by all the belfries along the hills or coast.

‘I have been to see him,’ said Musa wearily. ‘We had one of us to thank him, and you could not. I set out before dawn. It is a long way. Let me rest but a little and I will tell you all.’

She went into her own chamber, made fast the stone door, bathed her face, changed

her clothes heavy with dew, and sat while in the solitude, thinking.

What she was called upon to do cost her all her courage.

When she had summoned up her strength, and rested a little her tired limbs, she approached Este. He did not look up from the clay he worked on by the light of the oil wick. He was angered, irritated, suspicious.

She went to him and rested her hands on the slab of nenfro.

‘I could not bear that he should think us thankless, so I went. He bade me give you a message from him. If you will, he is ready to buy or to hire a ship, and carry you over the sea. If you like, you can go. That is what he told me to tell you.’

Este started violently and let fall the tool with which he worked.

He rose to his feet and breathed quickly.

‘He—a stranger—would do this for me? Are you jesting? It is impossible!——’

‘No ; it is true,’ she said in the same measured, low, grave voice in which she had spoken the other words. ‘He will do all that, if you wish him. I am to go back and tell

him what you answer to-morrow. He says that with gold all things can be done.'

'That is true,' said Este bitterly. 'But why should he do this for me? Why?'

'I do not know. Because he is generous, or because——'

She hesitated; she remembered that Sanctis had said he would do this for her sake.

A sudden light of fell suspicion flashed on Este. His eyes lit up with it as a dark night is lit up by blue fire.

'And the price?' he said between his teeth.

'The price?'

She did not understand him.

'Do you not see? Are you so simple? He will aid me to escape because he will thus sever me from you. He is your lover, or would be so. You are the price that he will claim for freeing me.'

A dark red flush came over her face.

'I do not think it is so,' she said firmly. 'He is a generous man; he is not a traitor. He will save you if you choose.'

For the first moment his natural impulse had been one of rapturous acceptance of his liberty, of passionate ecstacy at

the mere thought of feeling the winds of heaven upon him and beholding the width of the sea before his eyes.

Then in another moment that rapture passed, to be succeeded by the memory that he who offered him this possibility of escape was a stranger and an enemy; an enemy because a lover of Musa; one from whose hands he could not and would not take a benefit. A darker suspicion also came upon him. Was not this only the northerner's scheme to sever him and her? Was it not prompted by jealousy rather than by generosity?

He stood silent, with irresolute thoughts chasing each other in tumult through his mind.

He felt that he ought to leave her, to take away from her the burden of his useless existence, to lighten her of the weight and the peril of his concealment there; and yet all the manhood and nobility of descent that were in him told him that it would be but a greater meanness to use the money and the assistance of a man who loved her, and buy his own liberty by the tacit surrender and barter of herself.

The baser motive which Sanctis had

known he would attribute to the message seemed the only one which could possibly move a stranger to offer him a boon so immense, to incur a risk so weighty ; and the quick suspicion that lies in wait in every Italian nature, for ever watchful and sleepless, suggested to him darker reasons, crueller hopes, that might spur on this foreigner to share his danger and propose his flight. For the crime of which he had been accused, and for which he had been consigned to the galleys, any other nation would give him up, any other civilised country would be compelled by the laws of extradition to deliver him over to his own land to undergo his sentence.

After the first moments of involuntary gratitude and hope, he saw nothing in the message of Maurice Sanctis but an intricate and acute scheme to remove him for ever from Musa and consign him with more or less directness ultimately to the prisons whence he had escaped.

‘Your friend forgets,’ he said bitterly to her as all these thoughts coursed through his brain, ‘or maybe rather he remembers appositely, that I have been accused of and condemned for murder. That is a crime to

which nowhere any land is lenient. Go where I would I must hide myself in secrecy and shame, or be given up, the first time I walked abroad, to my own judges. He is a man who knows the world. He must know this very well. He would take me over the sea, indeed ; but on the shores whether of France, or Spain, or Greece, I should be assailed by the law and seized as soon as recognised. I am like your poor playfellows the birds ; if I escaped from the nets of my own land, it would be but to fall into the traps set on a foreign coast. They have hung this crime like a millstone about my neck, and in whatever waters I may try to swim it will always drown me, like a doomed dog. He talks of saving me!—he cannot do it so long as this charge, this sentence of me as an assassin, clings to me ; and the law has fastened it and locked it on me, and the world thinks the law cannot err ! Except on some desert island like to Crusoe's, I can never be safe ; I can never be sure that any night the hand of the law may not rouse me up from my sleep and shake me awake to my misery like the wretched hunted rat I am !'

'I do not think he knew that. Or at

least he believed, I think, that he could protect you some way. He is not false.'

'Why are you concerned to praise him?'

'To praise or to blame, I try and say the thing I see. I do believe he spoke in honesty. If I had not believed that, I would not have brought the message to you.'

'Cannot you see his aim?'

'To save you! I can see no other.'

'Who so blind as those who will not see! He would do this thing, even if he did do it honestly, for the sheer sake of severing you from me. I know I injure you, I hurt you; I know I have no right to let the burden of my fate lie on you. Perhaps long ago I should have gone out into the light and called the soldiers sooner than bring this peril and trouble upon you. No doubt I have been a coward. No hunted man is brave——'

'Do not think of that. You know—you know——'

Her voice failed her; it was not easy to her to find words for what she felt.

'I know!—I know all your goodness to me, though of late you have been hard and cold——'

‘No, no—never to you!’

‘Yes. You are the Musoncella even to me. That is because you do not love me! Listen. This is the most cruel dilemma you could place me in; I must do what is base, either going with him or remaining by you. Why did you bring me his message? Why did you put me in this strait? A man in my circumstances is like a bird with a broken wing; strive as he may he cannot rise. You have but brought me a torture the more. Take his arms back to him; I will owe him nothing. He sent me this offer only that he might make me feel the impotent thing I am. Whether I owe my bread and my shelter to you or to him, either way I am a beggar and ashamed!’

She heard him with infinite distress.

She could not follow the sudden changes of his thoughts; she did not see the injustice of his upbraiding; she was only stirred to contrition at her own share in this message which it had cost her so much to bear to him. She was overwhelmed with grief that she had seemed to put before him her own service, her own danger, for a single instant.

His rapid facile speech and his more

subtle and cultured reasonings always bewildered her and left her at a disadvantage before him; and she who had never feared any living creature did fear him with the tremulous and exquisite timidity of all great love.

‘If, indeed,’ he continued with passionate emphasis, ‘it is you who would have me go to be rid of me——’

‘I!——’

Her eyes spoke all the rest.

‘Yet I could never go—with his help or by his means. He loves you. There is no more doubt of that than of the earth’s turning. I am a felon, that is true; but once I was a free man and a noble, once I was Luitbrand d’Este. I am not so low or so base yet as to give *you* up in barter for my freedom, or owe an hour’s liberty to one who envies you to me!’

Musa shrank away, the hot colour burned in her face; she was astonished, bewildered, confused.

‘I am sure there is no thought of me,’ she said with effort. ‘I am sure he does not think of me in that way. He would aid you because he is a good man; but if you do not choose to go——’

A smile lightened all her face, her mouth trembled, her heart heaved.

‘I did tell you truthfully,’ she murmured, ‘because it was yours to judge. But it was hard to do it—ah! very hard.’

He looked at her with a quick glance.

‘Why will you always say you do not love me!’ he cried, with a little laugh of gladness and of triumph; the first laugh that had left his lips since his mistress had died in Mantua.

A shadow came back over her face.

‘I never said it,’ she answered him. ‘Only I cannot be what she was to you. She is still there. What is death that it should give us leave to be unfaithful? The dead are but gone before——’

‘You need not think of her!’ he answered angrily. ‘She would not have troubled her soul for you unless she had killed you as her lord killed her!’

She was silent. Her instincts were all true, but to reason on them was beyond her.

‘I am tired,’ she said at length. ‘I am very tired. I want to rest and sleep. In the morning I must go up to the mountains and tell him that you stay: am I to take his weapons?’

‘Yes. Tell him I will accept no gift from a man who loves you!’

‘He does not love me. Nor can I tell him that.’

‘Take them back to him, though they are the most precious things on earth. He shall not despise me more than he does already, and I will owe him nothing. Tell him that whenever, if ever, I am sure you do not love me, then I will rid you of the burden of me without his help. That will be easy enough. Gorgona is on the sea yonder, and death is at hand in every lagoon and pool.’

A shudder went over her.

‘You know well that I love you,’ she said gravely; then without more words she went into her chamber.

With the dawn she rose, after a long dreamless night’s rest, and went out towards the mountains. She put the pistols in her girdle, no thought of disobedience to him ever passed through her mind.

The dawn was red and very cold, the geranium hue of the sky glowing through the whiteness of mist as it had done the previous day; nothing is more beautiful than these winter dawns, so rosy, so luminous,

yet so vaporous, with the morning star shining clear and lustrous in the red of the easterly heavens, and the clouds drifting like smoke along the faces of the hills. All is so still, all is so calm ; here and there out of the mists looms a belfry or a tower or a group of pines ; all the rest of the earth is hidden in vapour which, as the sun rises higher and the day-star is lost to sight, gradually disperses and by noon has cleared away.

In these mists she walked and climbed, her lamb's-wool clothes about her close, her heart light and her step swift.

At the foot of the mountain she saw a figure standing beside a great gnarled olive, many centuries old. Sanctis had come down so far and waited for her. As she drew near he read the answer of Este on her face.

‘ He has refused ? ’ he said ere she could speak.

‘ Yes. He says you forget that he is accused of a crime for which he would be nowhere more safe than he is here, since in any land they would surrender him. He bade me thank you and bring you back your pistols. He cannot keep a gift he has no power to return in kind.’

Sanctis said nothing.

He understood that Este had misconstrued his motive and suspected his good faith, and he had expected that it would be so. He was not surprised; only the man seemed to him a coward and of poor spirit.

She said no more. She stood still, awaiting some expression of his anger or his regret, but he made none.

‘He has doubted me; he is unwise,’ he said coldly at last. ‘I would have done well by him. There is nothing more to say.’

‘You will take the pistols?’

‘Nay, keep them yourself. The time may come that you will want them.’

‘I cannot keep them. It would vex him. He said that you would despise him——’

Over the face of Sanctis went a passing look of unutterable scorn.

‘I do,’ he said curtly; ‘one little thing more or less can make no difference. Keep the pistols. That ever he has burdened you with need of them is what I despise.’

‘Since you insult him, I cannot keep them.’

She laid them on the grass beside him.

He took no notice ; he was in no mood to think of trifles.

‘You, so brave, can you care for a coward?’ he said abruptly. ‘I thought like went to like. Your boar of the forests does not mate with the shrinking doe.’

‘He is not a coward. It is you who are unjust. He is guiltless, and he is hunted. Even the boar flies from the dogs.’

‘He little deserves your faithfulness. Why will you not leave him?’

‘I would not leave a fox that had trusted me in such a strait.’

‘It was not you who brought it on him, and were he a man, indeed, he would walk straight up to the gates of a guard-house rather than he would bring on you the peril, the secrecy, and the shamefulness he does bring——’

‘Those are only words. You said all that yesterday. I will go now. I only came to give you his answer.’

He did not ask her whether she had given his message truthfully. Este might and did doubt her often ; he never did so. He understood her nature as Este never could do, though he should live beside her till age came to them both.

‘Come up to the house with me a moment,’ he said at last. ‘I wish to write a word to him ; and you need rest and food.’

‘I will not eat your bread. You speak ill of him ; you call him a coward.’

‘And you ? Can you say he is not ?’

Her face crimsoned with a more painful shame than she would have felt at any fault or folly cast to her own share.

‘He is hunted,’ she said sadly, ‘and he has been accused of crime whilst he is guiltless. Who would be brave that must needs fly and hide, and fear every breath of the wind that blows ? The heron and the hawk are both brave, yet they flee away.’

‘Come up to the house,’ he said to her, seeing that all speech was useless. They went up the steep grass path under the gnarled boughs of the old olive trees, and left the pistols lying on the turf.

‘Eat and rest,’ he said to her as they reached the marble court and corridor. He had wine and food ready for her, but she refused both.

‘I brought some bread with me, and I drank at a spring ; that is all I want,’ she said, and was steady in her refusal. He was a friend to her, but he was a foe to

Este. She would not break bread under his roof. She had the old barbaric honour and resentment in her.

He went to a table where an inkstand stood, as he had signed at it a few days before the deeds that made him master of the castle and the lands of Præstanella. He dipped a pen in the ink, then pausing, turned and looked at her.

‘You are resolved to share his fate?’ he said abruptly. ‘You will not change in that?’

Her eyes looked at his fully and fearlessly.

‘Have I not said twice, if he were but a fox I would not leave him, since he has trusted me?’

‘And since he loves you!’

She was silent. She did not choose to speak of that to him.

‘Such love!’ said Sanctis, with an impetuosity not natural to him, and a passion of scorn for which all words were too poor and small. ‘Have you never thought that it is your life you give away almost before it has begun? For you are so young: and this disgrace you take on you will last so long, so long; last till you lie

in your grave, however old you be when death comes to you. Why should you give yourself to him? Why should you not be honestly loved in open day? Why should you taint yourself with guilt that is not yours? Who will look at you after years passed in the solitude of those caves with a felon? Who will ever believe in your innocence, if innocent you still be? You shut the doors of fate upon yourself. You turn your life of your own will into stone. Nature has made you glorious gifts, and you throw them all away like rotting leaves. Think not that I speak for myself. I am nothing to you. I know I never touch a fibre of your heart or fancy. In all likelihood you will never see my face again. I speak for you; it is for you I sorrow. Better would it be for you to love a man dead in his coffin, than to love one whom at any hour the law may snatch from you and send to fret his years away in the horror of the prisons. When the law takes him it will never yield him up to you; it will never let you rest your eyes on him one moment; it will take him and keep him. Through his misfortune or his guilt, he belongs to the law. He is not even a free

man. All he can bring you, all he has brought to you, are a cruel burden, a shameful secrecy. Why should you give him this fidelity? He can give you nothing but disgrace——’

He paused, suddenly conscious of the futility of any such reasoning, of the utter uselessness of attempting to make her remember her own safety or her own welfare.

‘I thought you were proud,’ he added abruptly; ‘I used to call you “icy flame,” as Shelley called the moon. Are you not too proud to live thus—*you*?’

She had listened peaceably, with no sign of either emotion or anger except in the drawing closer together of her straight dark eyebrows, that looked as though a brush of ink had finely drawn them.

Even now she did not fully gather all his meaning, which his heart failed him to cast at her in coarse words.

‘I do not think of myself, and you need not,’ she said simply. ‘While he needs me, never will I leave him. If ever he do not need me, then will I never trouble him. I wish to go. Will you let me go now?’

He glanced at her, and ground his teeth together with a short, sharp sigh.

What was the use of words?

They would stir her no more than the spray of the sea stirred in a thousand years the stones of the colossal walls of the Pelasgians along the coast.

He turned away his face, and leaned his arms for a moment on the marble table where the manuscripts and documents were, and rested his head upon them. He was struggling with himself to repress what it rose to his lips to utter. He was tempted for the moment to the cruelty that would have said to her—‘You are the daughter of Saturnino Mastarna.’

Soon he recovered his self-control, and his resolve was taken. He drew a sheet of paper that lay on a table near, wrote a few lines upon it, folded the paper and sealed it.

‘Give that to him,’ he said to her.

‘You need not have closed it,’ she said with a little scorn. ‘I should not have read it; it is not for me.’

The stern teaching of Joconda, blending with the wayward honour that she inherited from a race whose boast it had ever been that they never broke a promise though

they often dealt a death-blow, had made her grow up in an integrity of good faith that was neither of her sex nor of her country.

‘Give it to him,’ said Sanctis.

Then he leaned against one of the columns of the corridor; his face was ashy pale and his breath came and went heavily; he looked away from her out over the landscape that was still half covered with billowy clouds that did not break and were transfixed with sunbeams as with golden lances.

‘I will give it him,’ she answered. ‘Farewell.’

He did not reply.

He leaned motionless against the marble pillar and covered his eyes with his hand. She went down the corridor with swift elastic tread, and disappeared beyond the farther archway amidst the grey foliage of the old olive trees that covered the hillside. There were twelve long miles down the mountains and over the meadows and the moors to the tombs; but she was sure of foot and used to fatigue. She went as lightly and as easily most of the way as the fawns did or the kids. When she grew very tired towards the close, she spurred on her aching feet with the thought of Este. He

was alone; he was unhappy, perhaps alarmed, at her absence.

She had the folded paper safe; she never thought once of looking at it.

Even so, Saturnino, oftentimes a monster and a murderer, had once, without looking at it, carried a bag of gold ducats from a dying traveller to a woman in a distant city. The traveller had trusted the robber, and had said--‘It is all I have, and she whom I love, without me will be penniless.’





CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHEN she brought to Este the written lines, he read them in silence. They said :

‘I will give up my life to the endeavour to prove your innocence, in which, at your trial at Mantua, I, almost alone, believed. If I be successful, I will only ask one thing of you: when you are free, do not forget your debt to her, and justify her in the eyes of all men.’ The paper was signed in full: ‘MAURICE ANTON SANCTIS.’

Este read it twice ; then burnt it.

‘Does it anger you?’ she asked.

‘No. I do not understand——’

It embarrassed him ; he could not comprehend. Why should this man, who loved

her, seek to do him service? The greater nature, with its finer impulses, escaped him; he felt baffled and humiliated; he groped in the dark of dim conjecture after possible motives which he conjured up one moment to reject the next. Thinking long, again and again, over the words written to him, he ended in disbelieving them. Vague suspicion was easier and more natural than belief in instincts entirely unselfish and pure of origin.

‘Is he truly gone?’ he said, looking at her with eyes that doubted her.

‘Gone? I do not know. He said that he was going. It does not matter; he will not come to us.’

‘You know that he loves you?’

‘No; that is not love; he does not speak as the Sicilian did——’

Jealousy darted from the dreamful gaze of Este; it is a hooded snake that always lies beneath the amorous smile of all Italian eyes.

‘There is another?’ he said with a quick breath of rage and of suspicion.

She was vexed with herself that she had spoken without thought.

‘It was only a sailor who wished me to

go with him and live on an island that he calls Sicily,' she said, with a troubled confusion in her thoughts. 'I told him I would never go; that it was folly. He will not come back again.'

'And I thought no eyes ever beheld you!' he cried, with amazed anger. 'I thought you hid unseen in the reeds and the woods like the moor-hen. Are there hunters for you as for her? Is the Maremma one great net? You should not listen. Why do you listen? If you loved me, you would be blind and deaf. That is love; that only. In all the sounds of the earth only to hear one voice——'

She looked at him. She did not speak, but in her humid sombre eyes there was such infinite love, passing all power of words, that he in turn was dumb.

His jealous petulance sank to silence, abashed before that mute eloquence of a single glance. The momentary fever of his roused senses was stilled and chilled by the immensity of sacrifice and heroism which that one look recalled to him.

'Ah, forgive me!' he murmured with instant contrition; and emotion which for the time was true and profound brought quick

tears into his eyes as he stooped towards her and leaned his lips upon her shining curls.

She drew herself from him with the same fear which at his touch, before, had stirred and trembled in her dauntless nature; a fear, vague, unintelligible to her, oppressive, cruel.

‘Why are you so afraid?’ he murmured. ‘Since we love each other——’

She put him away almost angrily. Her eyes had perplexity and terror in them.

‘I do not know why we should talk of it. I have loved you—always, I suppose. I have only thought of you, only of you, since that first night I found you in the tombs. But you—you have loved her. That cannot change. If you were dead I should but love you more.’

He shuddered as she spoke; the ghost of that woman slain in Mantua seemed to him to glide in between this living thing and him.

‘I think you would but love me better,’ he murmured, with some sense in himself of shallowness, of littleness, of guilt. ‘But I am not like you; I am not great or strong in any way, and she—well, she *is* dead, and

she has brought on me a living death, and in my misery you alone can give me any joy. Dear, men are not faithful so; why will you speak of her? The grave has her; her lord has heaped up marble over her; she is nothing, nothing, as the fruit is that rots and drops away. Why will you put her ever between yourself and me? We live, you and I; we are all alone, and the earth is above us, and we have nothing to do with it; we are alone, and we love one another——'

His eyes poured their beseeching passion into hers, his hands held her, his lips approached her; but once more she put him away from her with a look upon her face that he had never seen there.

'Ah, yes, I love you,' she said very low, and her voice seemed to him to have the very melody of the nightingales in it, so infinite a caress did it give with these three words. 'But we were happy—why did you speak?—it was better as we were. Do not touch me; it is ungenerous; let me alone, let us live as we have done. Never will I forsake you; but never must you make me ashamed.'

Then she withdrew herself quickly from

him, and went to the place where Joconda's coffin lay, even as she had done the night before. She shut to the stone doors and threw herself upon her knees, and prayed passionately.

He dared not follow her.

He remained in the gloom of the Lucumo's chamber, alone with his thoughts.

Before his vision stretched the pale, cold body of his murdered mistress, with the moonbeams finding out the death-wound in her breast. Her voice that was for ever silent seemed to rise and cry at his ear :

‘ Our hours of joy cost me my life ; and already hast thou forgotten ? ’

Already he had forgotten ; rather had done worse than forget ; had upbraided and cursed her memory because of the fate that through her had befallen him ; had done his very uttermost to thrust away from him remembrance of one in whom for three long years he had seen his heaven, his arbiter, his treasure, his supreme destiny.

A vague sense of shame stole on him.

Did he love this other now, he who in the moonlit luminous Mantuan nights had sworn his love eternal as the stars ?

Was this new-born passion love indeed ?

Or was it not the mere pulsation of reviving senses, the mere covetousness of a thing born only of the knowledge that others coveted it?

For months she had been beside him, and been no more to him than a generous boy who should have so defended and laboured for him would have been. For months he had seen her and heard her, and let her go and come, with no perception of her sex or of her youth, because his eyes were tired and his heart was sick.

But all at once he saw, and his dulled desires leaped from their ashes into fire, because other men also saw, other men also desired. But for them he would still have let her go by him, the unnoticed Nausicaa of his bitter Odyssey.





CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE winter heliotrope blossomed in the grass and the black hellebore bore its flowers as the year was born ; the nights had frost that melted with the sunrise, and were splendid with the winter-lustre of the constellations ; out of sight on all the great ploughed plains the corn was again as high as a man's hand ; on the hills at dark the fires of the charcoal-burners flamed with every fall of eve. It was the time she always feared ; the time when the sound of a foot on the grass made her hide, when all Maremma was given up to the northern labourers, when the animals panted and trembled with terror, and the wild birds flew in panic from the waters. She had always hated and dreaded the

winter that brought aliens to the land and death to the forest creatures.

Now she feared it with unceasing alarm. Any day the father of Zirlo might speak to a man from the mountains, or a shepherd with his travel-worn Lucchese sheep might pull the briony from the entrance-stairs, and oust her, and find the hunted fugitive, and claim the gold at Orbetello. Any day, any hour, she knew very well that this might betide them; and often all the night through she listened outside the tombs, her heart standing still with fear as the wild ducks flew by screaming hoarsely, or the greater owls beat the air with their broad wings, or the fox crept homeward through the rustling of the withered brake, a moorhen or a coot in his mouth.

The Church feasts of winter followed on one another.

Through the frosty air of the nights the bells of many a distant hamlet came sonorous though faint to her ears, ringing in the first masses of the morn. On such feasts she had been used to go up to the old dark church with Joconda and ask a blessing on the year; but it seemed to her now that she asked such blessing better, kneeling down where

the walls of the thick-growing bay enclosed her, and the turtle-dove, and the partridge and the friendly blackbird flitted by her as she prayed to heaven in her vague trustfulness which was rather hope than faith.

‘Keep him safely!’ was the perpetual burden of her prayer.

‘Yet what is the use?’ she would think wistfully as she rose from her knees and heard some distant report of a gun breaking the frosted stillness of the early morning. ‘God cannot care; He lets the birds be netted and the little gentle hare be torn with shot. They are His creatures as much as we, and He gives them over to make the wicked sport of men.’

No one cared; the terrible, barren, acrid truth, that science trumpets abroad as though it were some new-found joy, touched her ignorance with its desolating despair. No one cared. Life was only sustained by death. The harmless and lovely children of the air and of the moor were given over, year after year, century after century, to the bestial play and the ferocious appetites of men. The wondrous beauty of the earth renewed itself only to be the scene of endless suffering, of interminable torture.

The human tyrant, without pity, greedy as a child, more brutal than the tiger in his cruelty, had all his way upon the innocent races to which he begrudged a tuft of reeds, a palm's breadth of moss or sand. The slaughter, the misery, the injustice, renewed themselves as the greenness of the world did. No one cared. There was no voice upon the blood-stained waters. There was no rebuke from the offended heavens. To all prayer or pain there was eternal silence as the sole reply.





CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE words of Sanctis haunted her.

Any day, he had said, any day the law might come and snatch him from her and take him where never should she look on his face again. She had always known this; but spoken by him it took shape and substance as it had never done before. When she went into Telamone with her work and sold it to return with meat and wine, she saw indeed that the paper pasted on the wall by the State concerning his escape had rotted away under rainy weather and had not this time been replaced. Perhaps, she thought, the law had forgotten him. The law, no

doubt, had as many in its hold as the bird-catchers had songsters in their nets.

Yet she dared not hope this ; he said that it was impossible he could be pardoned, that his sentence, deemed a just one by his native city, was one which all other nations also would deem just. Any day, any soldier who sauntered down the grass-grown moles, any carabineer riding along the solitary shores, might hear some story from a shepherd, or a hunter, or a charcoal-burner, some hint that might awaken suspicion and bring mounted troopers over the moors and the gleam of gun-barrels amongst the thickets of briar rose and myrtle.

He, too, grew more irritable at his fate. What Sanctis had written to him, although he disbelieved it utterly, yet had aroused in him a faint hope, a faint sense of some possible eventual eliverance which made in the present his restlessness greater, his captivity almost more unbearable. One man had believed him innocent of the crime laid to him. Might he not find other men who believed also ?

To Este it had always seemed so incredible that they had suspected him ; that they had overlooked the wrongs received

at his hands by the jealous husband ; that they had been so readily deceived by the affected grief of her lord and by the marble mausoleum that he had built to her.

‘Why should I have killed her? She loved me always. Him she betrayed for me,’ he had said again and again to his counsel in Mantua. But none would see it so ; even his counsel, affecting to believe, had doubted, and had seen a young lover’s jealousy, rather than an aged husband’s vengeance, in that wound by the three-edged dagger.

He could not now credit the promise of the stranger to strive for a justice to him that his native city had denied to him ; yet the mere fancy of it moved him to a fitful longing and despair that were as a fever to him. One man believed him : that was so much !

As the oil lamp burning at night upon the slab of nenfro only made blacker the dense gloom all around, so this promise, which he disbelieved in, yet shed a ray of hope against hope upon him which only made the darkness and emptiness of his imprisoned life seem worse to him.

Silence and constraint, too, parted him and Musa. Anger on his side and fear on hers made a wall between them.

The words that had been said could not be unsaid. The magic syllable had been spoken which broke up for evermore their simple and innocent good-fellowship.

He had learned that other men found her fair ; she had learned that he also could thus regard her. He was angered at what seemed to him her coldness and her obstinacy ; she was troubled at his persistence and his irritation. The frank, familiar intercourse of the past was over for ever ; constraint and irritability came into their communion ; silence and timidity grew up like a barrier between them, builded by invisible hands.

A kind of reverence came to him for this daring and sinless nature, which was so unlike his own ; vaguely he feared her as in another way she feared him. Sometimes, when he watched her from the entrance-way come across the moors, with the sunbeams about her head and the shadows about her feet, old classic fancies came to him as they had come to Sanctis, and she seemed to him like a young Immortal for

whom all mortal love were too fleeting and profane.

But this mood lasted but a brief space with him ; there soon rose up in him the lower impulses, the less noble instincts. She was beautiful as any forest creature, all grace and vigour and harmonious movement, could be ; and she had said that she loved him, and yet he had not even touched her cheek with his !

A sombre anger brooded perpetually in him. He ceased to remember all he owed to her ; he was absorbed in the sense of all that she denied him.

‘I ask for bread and you give me a stone,’ he said bitterly to her one day, in that tone which always hurt her, confused her, and filled her with a dumb pain like that of an animal punished cruelly for no fault of which it is conscious.

Sometimes, in her vague terror of this potent influence which stole the strength out of her nature and the peace out of her heart, she almost longed to leave him, to run away into shelter and solitude as she had fled from the hunters and the shepherds.

But it would have been a cowardice, and in her sight therefore a crime.

Without her, what would become of him? How could he, who durst not venture into the light of day, who durst scarce creep out at night for a breath of air, maintain himself by seeking from the woods and moors what she sought for him? Without her he must starve, sink into absolute wretchedness, die most likely like a hunted beast walled up in a cave. Without her, the only link that held him amongst living men would be broken, the only kind of maintenance and of repose possible to his fate would be snatched from him. She had said, and said truly, to Sanctis that she would not leave in such a strait a fox that had trusted her.

He, meanwhile, thought her cold, not choosing to understand the conflict in her of her innate independence, courage, and innocence with the new and subtle and merciless passion which had invaded and dominated all her existence. In his experience, women drank in love as flowers drink the dews and sunbeams; he did not choose to acknowledge that here was a stronger nature than his own, or any he had ever known, which could not bend and accept the yoke of passion and obedience without

instinctive revolt against its own subjugation.

‘ You do not love me ! ’ was all he would say, and even whilst he cast the reproach against her he knew very well that not *thus* would any of his light-won loves have served him and defended him ; not thus would Donna Aloysia have dwelt content in the twilight of the sepulchres and the gloom of his own fate. He was thankless, unjust, exacting, tyrannical, as love oftenest is ; and his love was but the mere froth and fume of jealousy and sensual covetousness, and so lacked all higher aim or element, lacked all palliative of tenderness.

All the purer gold of his nature had been burned out of him under the inactivity and torment he had suffered, and little but the dross remained. Men in the Thebaïd might gather strength and purity and spirituality from the desert-silence ; but to him the endless lonely hours, the dull heavy hopelessness, the carking sense of perpetual danger, were on his temper like a block of stone upon turf ; all grew barren under the continuous pressure and the exclusion of all light and dew.

And in this misery of his there was only

one joy near him possible to him, and this she withdrew out of his reach and denied him. He began to think her cruel, as he called her. All that she did for him, all that she endured for him, all that she refused for his sake, grew as nothing. She would not let him take that 'bit of sweet basil' which was on her breast.

Yet he had conscience enough in him to know that he was thankless, and sought to repay good with ill; he had the pride in him that is born of gentle blood; he hesitated to overcome by surprise, or solicitation, the resistance that he met with when he spoke of love.

She grew greater in his sight, holier, at once more womanlike and more divine. Her reserve, her proud timidity, her superb innocence, gave her a power over him she had not had before. When she was absent he missed her, not only as a man misses his dog, but as a lover misses what is the breath of life to him. And her absence was longer and more frequent than even her daily work had before necessitated. She was oftentimes no further away than the nearest group of trees, watching as she worked for any sound or sight of danger to him; but to him, shut

in the gloom of the tombs, she was as utterly away when only a few yards distant as when out upon the sea or in some sea-shore town. Never dared he rise and go and scan the horizon to watch her coming. She was absent; that was all he knew. He, too, though he had read nothing of the poet drowned down northward by Lericia, began to find her 'icy flame.'

The love of her, at first mere jealous fuming, began at once to chill and to consume him.

'Why are you so cruel?' he muttered once, as he stayed her as she passed by him. She had some yellow crocuses in her hands; she was going to put them in a vase of water before Joconda's coffin.

'Are those in the fields already?' he said, touching them. 'Is it another year, then?'

'Yes. Do you forget? I told you February had come.'

'Did you? What is it to me? Here, all months are alike. Shipwrecked men lose count of time.'

He held her hand with the crocuses in it still within his own, his fingers on her wrist.

‘If you loved me, then I would count the sunsets!’ he murmured.

A blush went over her face; she was silent. With her other hand she loosened his fingers.

‘Why are you so harsh?’ he said angrily. ‘We who are so poor, we might be rich in love. Why are you so cold?’

‘You promised that I should be sacred to you,’ she said with a timid protest, scarcely daring to recall to him the first hours of his asylum there, lest in so doing she should seem to make of his shelter a debt.

‘What is more sacred than what we love?’ he murmured, with the music in his voice which stole all the strength out of her and lulled to drowsy gladness all her vague unrest.

Then with a sudden pang of memory she said to him :

‘And what is it that you love? Not me. If you were free to-morrow, would you stay, of your own will?’

He was silent.

‘We would go away together,’ he said, after a pause. ‘Go away as the swallows

you watch for, go. Ah! why do you speak of the impossible!

‘If you did love me indeed,’ she said, wistfully and gravely, ‘this place would be to you more than all the palaces of earth. If they offered me a palace such as you tell me of, I would not go to it, for we met *here*.’

He sighed with impatience and regret.

So once had been dear to him the grass-grown streets, the reed-filled waters, the melancholy ways, of ruined Mantua, because there at evening-time, when the white gnats came in clouds about the old bronze *fanali*, by the lamp-light, behind a grated casement, he had seen one woman’s face.

That had been love; even though it were dead now, killed with the same dagger-thrust that had killed her.

‘You are free to walk abroad,’ he said, with vexed impatience ‘Were you a prisoner as I have been, and as I am, you would know that one curses one’s prison, and would curse it though its walls were alabaster and its bars were gold. I am not thankless to these tombs, but they *are* tombs; and in them I am buried, alive, as the Etruscans were

buried, dead. Do ever you think of the future? I do, when I dare, and it would soon make me mad if I thought long. Shall we live here together, you and I, till we are old?—here, in the twilight, like two bats? Shall we never breathe without fear? shall we never hear an owl hoot without dread? Shall we see the seasons come and go, and never count the year by more than that? Shall I hear the sheep scamper above my head, and for ever envy them that they can trot at will amongst the thyme? Shall I watch age come upon your face, and you watch it in mine, and have no other record of time than the white hairs that come upon our heads? Shall we grow stupid or desperate, you and I, in all those years? Shall we lose our wits, living like this, shut away from all the world? Will the day come when we shall curse each other as I have lived to curse Aloysia?——’

His passionate utterance broke down; the dread and horror of his own visions overcame him; his eyes grew fixed and glazed as if he saw painted on the walls the shadow of those ghastly endless years to come?

She said nothing.

Pain seemed to ache through her heart as if some hard hand closed on and bruised it. If he had loved her indeed, the rocky prison would have smiled to him with heaven's sunshine ; the world of men would have been as nought ; the years would have been blent in one long dream without awaking once. Herself she would have asked no better thing than this ; to live thus always, hidden from human sight, undivided by any envious claim, alone in the soft twilight of this undisputed home, together, until age or death should find them both and they would rest for ever here, with the myrtle blossoms dropping on the rock above, and the wild-birds calling under the wild olive. She thought that even dead she would hear the murmur of the cushat and the woodlark's hymn.

He saw the softness come into her gaze, the sigh come upon her lips.

‘Ah, why will you not give me love at least!’ he cried. ‘We should snatch some joy at least from fate!——’

He had that skill which always made her feel that she herself had erred.

Was she wrong to shrink away when he spoke thus? Was he not so unhappy that

she ought to give him any peace she could? Ought she not to put her arms about his throat and kiss him on the eyes?

She doubted; she wondered; she was dissatisfied and ashamed at herself.

‘So long ago, when I was but a child,’ she said timidly, ‘Joconda made me promise—I did not know well what she meant—that no man’s hand should touch me without the blessing of God upon it. Now I do know: you and I cannot go up to any house of God in the open day as others can do when they will; and I must keep my word to her, she is not living to release me.’

He looked at her askance in surprise, chagrin, annoyance, and perplexity.

Must these dead souls, so still and helpless, with the lids of their coffins shut down on them, come thus perpetually, one or another, betwixt himself and her? And could she think that, were he free to walk abroad in open day, it was to take the way to the house of God that his steps would turn with her?

A sombre irritation rose up in him.

Could he never pluck it out, this ‘bit of sweet basil’ that was her superstition and defence?

‘You do not love me,’ he said with a great chillness in his voice that sank on her heart like ice. ‘Love does not reason so. It sees no past, because it knows it never lived before. Such ignorant vows women have taken in all ages, and in all ages have broken them for men. You cling to yours because you do not love me. Call the Sicilian back, or Sanctis. They can go out in daylight where you will.’

The injustice was so keenly cruel, so brutal in its very quietude, that it seemed to her to cut her very heart in two as with a knife. With the subtle adroit skill of unscrupulous argument, he turned her truthfulness and her simplicity against her, and made her feel as though in some way she had sinned to him.

‘I want nothing with them ; I have sent them away,’ she said, whilst the emotion she repressed made the veins of her throat swell with the sob she checked lest it should weary him. ‘Why cannot we live as we have lived ? We were so happy so ; now you are always angered, always reproaching me. How can you doubt me ? Since that midsummer night you came here, I have had no other thought than you.’

‘Those are words,’ said Este with impatience. ‘Kiss me once, and I will believe——’

The colour came up over her throat and cheeks and brow ; a tremor went over her.

‘I promised her, and she is dead,’ she said wistfully, while her voice was low and grave.

He flung himself away from her in wayward wrath.

‘You place an old lifeless hag before me, and you dare to say you love me !’ he cried with a child’s petulance and a man’s furious injustice.

‘You hurt me !’ she murmured, with an unconscious cry of pain. He wounded her, stung her, bewildered her, tortured her ; and yet she did not turn on him. She only vaguely felt that she had been to blame, and that he was too harsh in punishment and hurt her.

Este did not answer.

He did not even look at her ; he picked up his rude modelling tools and set a mass of the river clay on the slab of nenfro where he usually worked.

She watched him awhile, in wistful silence, as a dog chastised watches its

master. Receiving no word, no sign, no glance, she took her billhook from its corner and a coil of cord, and went out into the air to go into the thickets and cut heath and broom for firing.

‘Which of your lovers waits for you on the moors to-day?’ he cried to her with bitterness and irritation.

‘Lovers I have none,’ she said, as she paused in the entrance-place and looked back at him. ‘You I love with all my soul—but you do not understand.’

‘Nor you,’ he said with wrath. ‘You think a living man can be loved as you love a swathed mummy in her coffin. You have lived in these stone graves till you are as cold as they. You think the blood in one’s veins is water——’

A sigh quivered all through her; the hot blush came on her face again, half in shame and half in anger.

Did he call her cold—she in whose veins the blood was lava?

Cold! Who would do for him what she would do? who would give her life for him as she would give it, fighting for him as the stork and the eagle fight for their nest in the air?

‘Maybe that I am what you think,’ she said with some bitterness. ‘They call me the Musoncella.’

He let her go without more effort to detain her. She went out amidst the wild olive and myrtle and arbutus, and worked hard in the clear winter air, as the bittern sent his loud love-call over the water of the pool, and the brown partridge flitted from under the rosemary.

As she cut the withered shrubs and made them up in bundles, the tears she would not shed before him fell upon the billhook and the heath, and dimmed for her all the purple shadows of the moors and the sapphire heights of the enclosing mountains.

Where the bittern was calling near at hand, there was a broad sheet of water set within a frame of olive and willow and sedge: a shining steel-grey pond, reflecting on its bosom the shapes of the clouds and the blue of the heavens.

In this pond the *bosbutor* stood sending his long deep call to his mate, stooping his head down into the water and spouting its spray into the air as he uttered his continuous music. The female listened with

closed eyes and body gently swaying above the yellow reeds, lulled to delight by the sonorous chaunt that he was intoning, in her honour and for her wooing, over those solitary shallows.

The strange sound came to the human creature, to whom love was so perplexed and bitter-sweet a thing; she rested from her work with her hand upon her hip and the dry heath about her; she looked along the grey screen of the willow and olive bough, and saw the wild bird of the marshes and his mate yet unwon.

They were happy together there amidst the glancing water and the winter boughs. Love was the law of life, the gift and glory of all nature. Why not for her? Why not?

She knew so little of it.

She scarcely yet understood what she felt herself, and still less what he felt. To her innocence, his anger was unintelligible; to her ignorance, their life as it had been seemed so sweet that she could not comprehend why it only filled him with dissatisfaction and discontent. Herself, she would have asked no better than to live on so until death should find them out together.

Tenderness had awakened in her long before passion. For many a month it was as a devoted sister that she loved him; and only slowly and at intervals did the deeper, hotter springs of life stir in her; beside there was always, on her, like the cold and heavy hand of a dead thing, the memory of what he had loved in Mantua.

To the concentrated and intense nature which so many hours of solitude and so much silent unuttered thought had made even graver and more passionate than it was by instinct, it seemed impossible that a woman he had adored should have passed out of his life because death had taken her. The terrible might and melancholy of that story, which had thrilled on her ear the first night she heard it told, and sunk into her very heart as she had listened, weighed on her still. He might forget; she could not.

That dagger-stroke in Mantua seemed to her to unite him with that dead woman in indissoluble union.

She did not know that tragedies drift out of the memories of men as wrecked ships sink from sight under a rising tide; she did not know that 'violent delights

have violent endings,' and that passion is not always love, nor even love always remembrance. She did not know that over a man's soul the sirocco of the senses blows madly for a day, and then often dies down and leaves but dust behind it.





CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE day following she said to him :

‘There is no more flour and there is no more wine ; I must go to Telamone. I have a roll of cloth that I have spun to sell. Shall I go to-day?’

He looked at her in doubt.

‘Do you go to meet the Sicilian sailor?’ he said bitterly, and was ashamed of himself as he did so.

‘It is not fair to say so to me,’ she answered him patiently. ‘Though I did meet him, what would it matter? I have no eyes that see him. Wherever I go it is you who go with me. You know that.’

‘I know I am not worthy of your answer!’ he said with instant repentance.

‘It is but the truth,’ she said simply. ‘As for the sailor, I think he is far away, by this time. Shall I go to Telamone to-day?’

‘Do as you wish ; you are wiser than I.’

‘I must take the boat if I go ; I cannot carry the cloth all the way by land. Pray, pray be prudent. Do not burn a fire by day, the smoke might be seen ; it passes upward through that hole in the rock ; I saw it myself yesterday. If a shepherd saw, he might come.’

‘Put the fire out, if it trouble you.’

‘Without it you are cold, I know ; down here it is cold, though above the sun is so hot. Ah, that you could but see the light.’

‘I see it through your eyes as blind men do by eyes they love.’

She was silent ; she busied herself in getting ready the strong linen cloth she had spun in the winter, and in getting ready also the simple meal that he would require in her absence. For herself a crust of bread taken with her was enough.

‘The first nightingales sang last night,’ she said. ‘Did you hear them?’

‘No ; do you know what I hear when I

sleep or lie awake at night? 'I hear your voice always, saying cruel things.'

She coloured and did not answer him.

Was she cruel?—and to him?

It was early day, the sun had but just come over the mountains; there was a loud piping and trilling of birds above ground amongst the myrtle and olive.

She was ready to go; she had the cloth rolled in a bale, which she would carry on her shoulder. She looked at him wistfully; a great longing came over her to drop down at his feet and bury her face upon his knees and cry out to him—'I am thy servant, thy dog, thy love!'

But she was haunted by the memory of the dead Mantuan woman, and by the remembered words of Joconda; she restrained the passion of tenderness that welled up in her as the moment of her own departure drew nigh. She placed before him all that he might need during the day, and without meeting his eyes said to him: 'Farewell for a little while. Be careful, oh I pray you! Be careful.'

'Why should I take any care?' he said bitterly. 'If we are for ever to live thus,

Gorgona will be less pain to me than where you are.'

She gave a quick sigh, and without answer took up the bale of homespun cloth and mounted the steps of the entrance.

When she parted the boughs and emerged into the open air the glory of a dazzling morning was sparkling all around her on the brimming waters and the dewy earth.

A hare was peacefully nibbling at the grass; a jay was swaying on a bough and meditating his own homeward flight; further away in the distance, against the light, there was a pretty group of a mare and two foals; down in the dark green rosemary bushes at her feet a pair of green grossbeaks, hardly to be told from the shrub, were pecking in play at one another.

'If only he could come into the air!' she thought with passionate pain.

What use are the most loving eyes of others to, the blind shut in the impenetrable darkness of their own calamity?

She could do for him what the sister, or wife, or daughter does for the blind man; she could watch for peril for him, bring him food, labour that he should live; but

she could not lead him from the gloom up into the light, she could not make him rejoice in the green world that was renewing its youth.

An impulse of longing to look on him once more made her retrace her steps, and made her kneel, leaning down to look through that cleft in the rock roof of the tomb which she had made in the earliest days of her occupation of the tombs, that by its orifice the smoke of her wood fire might escape.

Through the fissure she saw straight down into the chamber where she had first found the golden warrior on his bier. She saw Este as he sat in the stone chair once sculptured there for visitants to the dead. His body was bent, his arms lay outstretched on the table of nenfro that held his modelling tools, his head was bowed down on them; his whole attitude expressed the unnerved, weary, hopeless dejection of a man to whom life was valueless.

The sight of him thus smote her as if with a blow. He called her cruel: was she in truth cruel? Was she cruel as one who denies water to a chained dog, air to a

caged eagle? Did she indeed give him a stone when he craved bread?

A vague, heavy sense of wrong done by her to him went with her over the broad moors and meadows, and along the shining sands of the shores.

She got her boat out and pushed it into the water and loosened her little sail.

The wind was favourable to her, and the boat danced buoyantly on its southward way. But her heart was heavy as lead.

When the swell of the Sasso Scritto rose up between her and her moors, she felt as if she had bade him farewell for ever.

For once she had no eyes for the gannets gathering above the sea for their northward flight, for the rock-martins flying along the face of the cliff, for the sandpipers tripping amongst the samphire of the shore, for the curlews screaming above the estuary.

She had told him the truth.

She only saw him wherever she went.

No one would buy her cloth at any reasonable price at Telamone; she knew what she ought to get for it, and was unwilling to sell it for too little. Most of the people there were poor, and the few who were not so were mean. She saw nothing

to do but to try at Orbetello. The wind was all in her favour, and the sea, though boisterous, was no stormier than pleased her, sea-gull as she had been called so long.

The boat beneath her, as it rose and sank and leaped the crests of this wave and of that, was to her as the horse is to the fearless rider. The sea was so familiar to her ; she was at home upon it as any one of the storm swallows after which they had named her in her babyhood.

The red and green of the tufa land, the deep shadows of the pine-woods, the pale aloe-dotted shores, the distant mountains amethyst and purple as the mists cleared from them, flew by her rapidly ; a belt of seething, wind-blown, sunny water flashing and heaving between herself and them.

At Orbetello she could sell her linen, not over well but at a fairly decent price.

She rested a little, ate her bread, and bought for a small bronze coin a plateful of cooked rice ; then she purchased the wine and the flour she needed at home, and put the rest of the money she had earned safely away in the breast of her tunic.

There did not remain much, for wine was dear in vineless Maremma. She paid a

visit of gratitude to the old chemist, and took him a basket of rare mushrooms, and told him that when the time came to gather herbs she would not forget her promise.

‘You have a face that remembers,’ said the old man, pleased.

‘How can anyone forget?’ said Musa. It was that which seemed to her strange. Neither benefit nor wrong would have been ever written in sand with her. Though he had been dying before her, never would she have forgiven Zirlo.

‘Did the sick man recover?’ the old chemist asked.

‘Yes; it was your cordials that saved him. That is why I came now to thank you.’

‘And does he marry you, this spring-time?’ said the old man, with good-humoured pleasantry.

‘Ah, no!’ cried Musa quickly, with a colour deep as the dark winter rose on her face.

She went out of his pharmacy without bidding him good-day. The thoughtless question had gone like a knife into her heart.

That was what Joconda had meant when

she had made her swear on her Maddonnina.

Laden with the flasks of wine and oil and the little sack of flour, she took her way to the quay; and as she went almost ran against an old lean man with a pipe in his mouth.

‘Eh, la Velia!’ stammered Andreino in sad fright.

‘Is it you?’ said Musa with contempt in her voice. ‘Did they not tear you to pieces amongst them, squabbling for the money in the pitcher?’

‘Aye, aye, almost they did, the greedy souls,’ said Andreino quaking. ‘And where have you been all this while? You know I always loved you. I did hear that you were in service somewhere upon the mountains; but I said to them, so handsome a wench, and so handy with a boat, have the coaster lads no eyes——’

‘I have found a home and work yonder,’ said Musa, cutting short his compliments, with a sign of her head as she spoke towards the westward. ‘As for you, I do not forget that you used to lend me your boat when I was a child. But you were weak and miserable when those women raged——’

‘Oh, my dear, my wife was amongst them ; if you had come quietly to us instead of dashing that pitcher down and wasting all that fair money——’

‘Oh, you would have loved me as long as the money had lasted,’ said Musa with a curt sarcasm. ‘So would any one of them ; you are not alone there.’

‘But you have got money now ?’ he said with an envious glance at the flasks she carried.

‘These are not for myself,’ she answered. ‘And how goes on the smuggling ? Has the coastguard never yet found out that closet of yours behind the olive-wood Pietà ?’

‘Oh now, my sweet child, be quiet !’ began the old man trembling. ‘There are guards and soldiers all about, and never did I do you any harm, but lent you my boat and gave you pretty shells, and would have welcomed you always.’

‘You are safe with me, Andreino, and your secrets too,’ she said with a little laugh as she bade him good-morrow and went down towards the quay. He would let her alone, she thought, now that he knew she could bite.

The old man hobbled after her and touched her on the arm.

‘You were always running about over all the wild places,’ he said timidly. ‘Did ever you see that young man the law is looking for always? The placards have been down a long time, the rains worked havoc with them, but no doubt you will have read them, and there is a pretty penny to be made that way, and if you should have ever seen him——’

‘There is a pretty penny to be made, too, by telling how tobacco is run in at Santa Tarsilla,’ she answered him calmly. ‘I am no informer, you know that; do not you begin to be one in your old age. If the young man escaped the fever of the marshes, surely men may let him live in peace wherever he be; such peace as he can have with a price upon his head.’

‘Who is your lover that has been ill?’ murmured Andreino in wheedling, insinuating tones as though he were caressing her. It was the merest guess with him, made in shrewd cunning.

His eyes, keen still to mark such things though he was nigh ninety years old, saw the blood go away from the peach-like cheek

that the sun and the air had kissed all her years through. Her very heart seemed to stand still in her terror. But she had courage and presence of mind; she looked the old rogue full in the eyes.

‘If a lover I have, what is that to you? We do not ask you for bit or sup, Andreino. You used to know me well. Remember how I bit the hand of the man that struck my dog. My dog is dead, but my blood is alive.’

She looked at him all the while full and sternly in the face, and the old man was frightened.

‘I meant but a jest,’ he mumbled. ‘For sure you are the same as you were, with your terrible eyes and your terrible tongue; but your friend you know I always was, and always will be, my dear.’

‘That is well,’ said Musa carelessly, hiding the apprehension that sickened her as she thought of the hand of the law held out with the blood-money, and the greedy hand of this old man stretched out to take it. If Andreino ever knew, the law would know also before the day was an hour older.

She left [him and gained her boat and put her purchases in it, and let fly the little sail. Andreino stood watching by

the sea-wall. To give him a false scent she steered south-westward for a mile or two, with the black peaks of the Argentaro between her and home. Then, when she was distant enough for none to be able to tell hers from the many other similar boats that were out on the sea that day, she tacked and put her little vessel about, and repassed the rocks of Orbetello standing herself well out to windward, so that from the mole of the town her sail looked no bigger than a white speck against heavy leaden-coloured clouds that were drifting up slowly under the pressure of a strong cold wind.

But to put about thus, and place that square mile and more of heaving water between Orbetello and herself, had taken several hours ; the day was advancing, and the sun was low, as she came once more on the northerly tack and began to steer to the north-east. She was too good a sailor not to guess the meaning in the whistle of the wind and the steely hue of the great banks of clouds that rose higher and higher over the face of the sky. Far away, where the Atlantic races through the Straits of Gibraltar and the waves of Biscay lash the

Spanish coast, a sea-storm was raging already, and coursing like a greyhound to reach and overtake the blue Ligurian waters.

Even if she had not known what soon would come by the look of the sky and the feel of the waves, she would have known it by the way in which the big ships in the offing spread every stitch of canvas in the effort to make a port before the tempest should be upon them, and the way in which the little lateen craft came running in from every point of the compass, fishermen knowing that 'the devil would take the hindmost.'

Her own boat flew like a curlew, for the change in the wind favoured her, but though it sprang from wave to wave and was as buoyant as any cork Musa knew her own danger very well. Her boat was but as a nautilus-shell that would soon be tossed and whirled in a typhoon. To reach her own shore would be hard; to land might prove impossible. She reproached herself bitterly that she had not read more wisely the look of the skies at daybreak; but even wary and weatherwise fishermen make such mistakes at times, and have the blackness of the tempest and the howling hurricane down on

them, and their vessel keel upward in the boiling surf, ere they can cry out one single prayer to the Mother of mariners.

Sometimes, she knew, out of a score of feluccas that went out at sunrise blithe and busy as a swarm of swallows, five or six only would come home to the mole next morning. The hungry *libeccio* would have swallowed up the rest.

The storm was not yet down, but made itself felt in the chill of the air, in the force of the gusts, which fell like blows, in the swirl and surge of the waves, in sunshine so blue, now yellowish-white and leaden-grey. The little boat still flew, elastic and easy, before the wind, rocking and reeling often, but always righting herself, even though drenched again and again with water. Musa was wet through; the shrill wind whistled amongst her curls and blew them upright; it was all she could do to keep her place, and cling to the tiller to keep the boat's head due north.

The hours she had lost, going about to hide her destination from Andreino, had brought her into the very press and peril of the wild weather that had come upon sea and land. But for that she would have been

home by now. She could scarcely keep in a bitter cry, all useless as was such lament, thinking of him at home watching for her, wondering, doubting perhaps, alone with the bitterness of his own heart all through the weary day.

The sun had long been covered by the dense western clouds and she could not well guess the hour, but it began to grow very dark, and big raindrops began to fall. She could hardly tell her course; all before, behind, on every side, was fog and spray and gloom.

She thought with a continual agony, 'what will he do if I should drown?'

She knew it was very likely that she would drown, alone, out at sea on such an evening in a little open boat. She had seen the cruelties of the sea in all their shapes from her babyhood. She had seen many a drowned man washed up on the sand, swollen, eyeless, half-eaten by the sharks. She knew the great fish that waited down there underneath the waves, to give an added horror to death. She knew all the ghastliness of death in the deep sea. But it was not of herself she thought, but of him. He had no one in all the world but herself;

what would become of him if the sea killed her?

All the while as this one thought kept place in her mind, to the exclusion of all others, she did all that it was possible to do to save the boat and herself. Once she was washed fairly out of the boat, but she clung to it with both hands, and climbed over its wet side, and went on again in the trough of the trembling waves. The flasks of wine and oil and the sack of flour had been washed over also, and were lost. Even in that moment of mortal jeopardy she felt a pang the more to think he would not have those things he so sorely needed.

What headway she was making, whether she was close inshore or out at sea, she could not tell; all was black as night around her. Now and then the lightning flashed, now and then she could see the whiteness of the hissing water; now and then the wind lulled, and she could hear the minute-guns of some ship in distress firing far away behind her. There is many a coral reef and many a sunken rock along the sea-shore of Maremma.

‘Are the angels all dead that tend the stars?’ she thought, in the vague fancy that

the songs of the 'angiolin' had imbued her with; and then she set her teeth and clung on for dear life again. No one in heaven cared. It was with her as when the moor-hen was shot on the waters, as when the woodlark was trapped in the net. No one cared. There was no 'angiolin' beside the stars!

She was now almost numb with cold. The water drenched her, rain and salt water both poured over her, and the night had grown bitterly cold. She supposed it was night, she could not tell. She put off her heavy shoes, and made her clothes as light as she could, knowing that at any moment she might have to float and swim for her life. She kept her hold as well as she could on the tiller, and kept the boat as far as she could guess due north.

The sea seemed like some great cauldron that boiled and seethed. The roar and the shriek of the winds were incessant. The rain seemed to strike like whips. The little craft was well-built and seaworthy, and kept afloat where a heavier vessel would at once have filled and sunk. But she knew very well that every moment might be her last, and a great cold had crept into her very

blood. She began to grow giddy and to feel deaf, the noise of the winds was so loud, the swirl of the water was so riotous. She began to be bewildered and dull; and she kept saying, ever and ever and ever aloud, ‘ what will he do if I drown? what will he do? ’

That was her only distinct thought. All the rest, without and within, was darkness, utter darkness, in which she was thrown hither and thither and buffeted by the winds and the waves. At last one great wave took her and cast her over the boat’s side. She flung up her hands in vain, the boat was no more there; the weight of the leaping billow dashed her on her back, and the salt foam poured between her lips.

‘ What will he do? ’ she thought. ‘ What will he do? ’

That was her last conscious moment.

The sea closed over her and she knew no more.





CHAPTER XL.

WHEN she unclosed her eyes from out of the trance of death, she lay upon the stone floor of the tomb before the wood fire.

Este kneeled beside her ; her hands were in his, his breath was on her cheek.

‘What has happened ?’ she said stupidly ; then suddenly remembered.

‘The oil and the wine are lost!’ she cried ; then grew drowsy and stupid again as the warmth from the burning wood stole over her and rejoiced all her cramped and frozen body.

‘What matters that?’ he murmured over her. ‘You are saved ; you live.’

She smiled dreamily, her eyelids had dropped again. She was but half awake.

It was so pleasant to lie there, at home, with the glow of the fire spreading over all her wet numb limbs, and the sense of his hands on hers, of his voice on her ear.

Her head rested on a log of wood covered with a goatskin; her damp curls began to grow crisp, and the gold in them shone in the light of the blazing wood; her face was pale as marble; her slender feet lay bare and white upon the other goat-skins he had spread beneath her; she was more lovely so in her helplessness than she had ever seemed to him in all the plenitude of her strength and health.

He murmured tender and passionate words over her; he kissed her curls and her hands and her feet; it had been those kisses which had awakened her.

Now, as she lay half dreaming, half smiling, only half conscious yet, he drew back from her a little; he was afraid to alarm her; life in her had seemed for a time so still that he had thought her dead. She had had no more motion, no more breath in her, than a broken lily thrown down on the grass.

But Glaucus had only played with this his favourite child; he had not killed her.

She lay still for many minutes ; now and again her eyes looked for a moment up at the familiar shadows of the tomb and then closed with the dreamful pleasure of a child that lies half asleep and hears sweet music.

‘I was afraid,’ she murmured once, ‘I was so afraid—for you!’

Then she lay still and seemed again to dream ; her eyes closed, her lips parted with a faint glad smile.

The tears fell from the eyes of Este.

After awhile she raised herself quite suddenly, and a look of alarm and of fuller comprehension came upon her face.

‘I was drowning,’ she said aloud. ‘I was thrown out of the boat and was drowning. What has happened? I was coming back and the storm broke. The wine and the oil were lost. I am sure that I swam, and the water threw me down and buried me. How am I here? Who helped me?’

‘Do not ask that?’ said he tenderly. ‘It is enough that you *are* here. Be still—forget.’

She raised herself higher and leaned on the skins with one elbow, and so sat half erect and fastened her gaze on him.

‘Tell me, tell me; I want to know! I

am not mad? I have not dreamt it, have I? I was drowning; oh yes, I was drowning—is it long ago? Who brought me home? Is the boat safe?’

‘I brought you home, dear.’

‘You! Tell me about it; tell me quick! I do not think I am mad. I am sure there was a storm; I was sure I went underneath the sea, down—down—down. The water was in my mouth and in my ears. I have not dreamt it. Where is the boat?’

‘Be quiet; try to be calmer and I will tell you. Yes, you went out in the boat to-day and there has been a storm, a terrible storm. It is not over yet, but you are safe here.’

‘Yes?’

She listened as a child listens to a tale, her eyes dilated, her lips parted, leaning still on one arm upon the goatskins before the fire. She was quite warm now; the colour had returned to her face, her curls were scarcely wet, and lay heavy and soft over her brows.

‘Yes, you are safe here,’ he answered her, afraid that her consciousness was still dim and her thoughts were vague; and speaking in the simplest and the clearest words

he could that they might find their way to her brain without startling her. ‘You are home and with me; we are both safe. When the storm came I sat here till I could bear to hear it no longer, knowing that you were out upon the sea. I do not know the time—it may have been at Ave Maria or later—that the horror of the thought grew too great for me to sit here and endure it. I was in safety, warm beside the hearth that you had made for me; and you were there alone in the dark on the waters. I got up and I went out. I could see nothing for the rain, I could hear nothing for the wind; I could only tell that out at sea the night was terrible. I lighted your lantern, and I walked on and on, on and on, making for the shore as well as I could guess. You had told me certain landmarks, and by the lantern light I could avoid the bogs and the trunks of the trees. Still I think I must have been a long time getting to the shore. It seemed to me the whole night—perhaps it might be less than an hour—I cannot say. I could hear a minute-gun far away over the waters; and I knew you were out at sea, unless by Heaven’s mercy you had had some warn-

ing of the storm and had stayed in harbour. But I thought, whatever the weather was you would be trying to come back to me. I was sure that you were in the boat in that awful darkness. I walked and walked; there was not a star to guide me, all above and below was black as ink. I could only hear the rushing of the wind, the crashing of the boughs. Once a herd of cattle and horses tore past me, mad no doubt with fright; they almost trampled me down amongst them. I saw no other living thing. I forgot that I was a hunted felon; I only remembered you. I felt the wind was from the south-west, and so walking against it I hoped to come to the beach at last. If I had known the country as well as you, I should have had no fear. As it was, I knew I might walk the whole night yet never find the sea. But all at once I felt my feet wet. I stooped and tasted the water; it was salt. The roar of the wind was so loud that I had missed the sound of the sea, but the sea it was. By the lantern light I could see the foam on a breaking wave. Now I was there I seemed no nearer you. I had no boat; I could do nothing; my sight could not pierce the darkness by a yard's length. You might

be drowning, I knew, within a foot of me, and I helpless, knowing nothing of it. On Gorgona I saw many storms, but none so dark as this. I wandered miserably up and down, to and fro, on that stretch of sand. The sea had rolled up, I think, much higher than it rises in fair weather. I could not tell what to do ; only I could not go home, thinking you were lost in that hissing, boiling, howling blackness, that seemed to have swallowed up both earth and sky. The soldiers might have taken me if there had been any there ; I do not think I should have known they touched me. Going along the shore, to and fro, like a lost dog, with the great wall of those waves you love beside me, and the water rolling with a sound like thunder, I touched something with my foot. It was you ! You were lying there in the wet sand, with the foam of the surf all about you. How you came there I cannot tell. The sea loved you because you never feared it, and so saved you, I suppose. I suppose the breakers had nursed you like a child, and thrown you gently at last upon the lap of the shore. You were quite insensible, but your heart was beating. I carried you here.

I missed my way twice or thrice, and the way was long. But at last we came home. That is all. Ah, dear, do not say I do not love you ever again.'

She had heard him in perfect silence, her eyes wide open, her lips parted, pushing back her hair with her hand, and seeming to hang upon each accent of his voice.

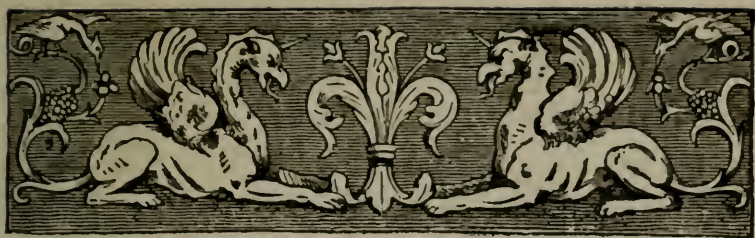
When his words ceased, she gave a startled cry that was half a sob.

'You did that for me?' she said, in a wondering whisper. 'You ran that risk—for me?'

He stooped and kissed her.

With a sigh and a smile in one breath, she threw her arms about his throat.





CHAPTER XLI.

ALL the earth was rejoicing with the thrill of the spring.

The song-birds were returning, and through the hush of morning and of evening the merry song of the starling and the sweet piping of the woodlark stirred the woods. In all green moss-grown places violets were blossoming and the tender fronds of new ferns uncurling; along the sides of all the runlets of water the first primroses were budding, and all along the sandy shores the squills and the sea daffodils were beginning to appear. The nights began to grow melodious, the first nightingales arriving with their love chaunts; and all the daylight seemed full of flitting wings and amorous trills till even the sombre rosemary

trembled with their mirth and their pleasure; the lowly tussocks of dog-grass and the lofty ilex and robur-oaks were alike the home of their innocent passions, and down the shadowy waters, between the solitary brakes and thickets, the water birds sailed before each other's eyes in their pomp of courtship and coquetry of wooing.

All living things loved one another; from the partridges that tripped together through the thyme to the little warblers sounding the first notes of their return amidst the sedges of the pools.

And the human lovers were also happy, and even in the shadows of the sepulchres their hearts thrilled in unison with the joy of the awakening year.

Now and then love triumphs over circumstances, and nature is a stronger thing than all the laws of men.





CHAPTER XLII.

AWAY in Mantua the weather was still chill and cheerless, the waters were still yellow with the snows of winter that melted into mud, the sun that warmed the green Maremma land and set a nest under every tussock of grass, and covered with blossoms every inch of the rich red soil, did not as yet shine on the melancholy city in the midst of the northern plains. White fogs drifted up over the surface of the lakes, and keen winds came over the Venetian Alps and sighed down the deserted arcades and through the lonely palaces.

At evening time a man would walk, the same way always, out westward by the Argine del Mulino, and would watch the

sun go down in the west where Maremma lay far away beside the sea, and would say to himself as he looked, 'What does the sun see in that green land?'

The people of Mantua only knew him as a stranger, one of the many travelling painters who were lured there by the sad charm of the pale waters reflecting the domes and towers and walls, and the arches of the bridges, and the tall belfries whose metal tongues called but to mass, and never more to war. He was silent, reserved; they thought him poor; he passed his days drawing the austere palaces, the ruined fortresses, the many stories told in stone; sometimes he took a boat and passed long hours out on the lagoons still grey and wind-blown with the lingering winter's breath. No one noticed him; he was but a painter like so many; out in the world he might be famous, but here in Mantua he was unknown and disregarded.

Mantua slept like a magician enchanted by his own spells, whilst the grass grew long on the roofs and the battlements, and the works of gorgeous Giulio faded and dropped to dust in the palaces above the waters or down beneath the blue acacia shadows.

The stranger attracted no notice as he came and went amongst the market people and the fishermen ; they did not observe that he was constantly watching the dark figure of Don Piero di Albano as it emerged from the vast arched ways of the palace on the Lago di Mezzo, or returned from the law courts in the mist of the frost-touched evenings. Don Piero had raised a mound of fair marble to his wife, and paid daily for masses for her soul, said in the noble church of S. Andrea, and went about amongst his fellow-citizens still in the garb of woe and with a long face, mourning for his young spouse.

But Sanctis never saw his shadow lengthen on the moss-grown stones but what he said to himself, 'this is the assassin.'

How to prove it? That was the problem which perplexed him and baffled him, and which he turned over and over in his thoughts every evening time that he walked out by the mills of the Twelve Apostles, and looked across the water to the sombre front of the great iron-bound Gothic palace, where in the summers that were gone Donna Aloysia had leaned from her casement to

watch her lover's boat glide towards her in the moonlight.

‘Do you still believe in Romeo?’ said with a smile the Abbate he had spoken to on the evening after the trial, recognising him once as they paced side by side over the drawbridge.

‘I believe him to have been guiltless of that crime,’ Sanctis answered gravely.

‘Mantua condemned him, and Mantua knew him,’ said the Abbate; ‘you did not.’ Sanctis was silent.

‘And the husband?’ he said abruptly. ‘What has Mantua to say of him?’

‘A pious man,’ said the priest, ‘and a forgiving one. Donna Aloysia was notoriously unfaithful, yet he has built her a fair tomb all of marble, and with a silver ever-burning lamp above it; and every day—every day, mark you!—masses are said for her soul at his cost in S. Andrea.’

‘No doubt a most holy man,’ said his hearer assenting; and leaned over the parapet and looked at the sun setting in crimson glory beyond the leagues of bulrushes and the grey placid waters.

‘Why should I try to do him this good?’ he thought. ‘Mantua knew him and Mantua

condemned him ; and if ever I should be able to prove his innocence, how will he use his liberty? Will he be faithful to her once he ceases to need her? Will he justify her before the world when the world is once more open to him? I doubt ; I doubt. Perhaps I shall be able to force him to it ; but of what value is extorted honour, is compelled love? I doubt ; I doubt. He has no real love for her. He is a wayward, weary child, and she is the only plaything that lies near his hand, the only blossom to be plucked within his reach. That is all ; and she—she gives life and eternity, body and soul ; she only breathes through his breath, she only sees through his eyes, she only lives by him. That is love. Nothing else is. And if I should set him free to-morrow, what would he do? Forget? I think so. Here his dead love was slain, his passion was closed in death ; and he has forgotten that. Once free he will forget this too. He will leave Maremma behind him and remember it no more than he will remember the marsh-lilies that bloomed there last year.'

That he knew ; but he had promised to give his life to Este's service. He could not

draw back once having pledged his honour to the task.

He watched the sun sink away over the pale leafless Lombard plains, and sink out of sight amidst the golden mists of the coming night. The rays from the set sun were still red in the heavens and, falling on the many casements of the dark palace where Donna Aloysia's beauty had once been like a gorgeous flower blooming in a dungeon, turned all the glass behind the iron bars to flame-like radiance, and made the melancholy waters washing the walls glow for the moment like a stream of opals and rubies.

‘I will keep faith with him,’ Sanctis said to himself, as he leaned and watched the sombre pile. ‘Maybe he will feel his debt to me, and so keep faith with her.’





CHAPTER XLIII.

THE fair commencement of the spring spread into fuller glory; the air grew full of the scent of narcissus and woodruff; the gladwyn and the iris, purple and azure, blossomed beside every pool and runlet of water; in the woods the flowering ashes were white as new-fallen snow, the sombre ilex glades grew light with their young leafage, the bird-cherry and the fragrant cherry were in bloom, and the goats cropped once more the tender leaves of cistus and of myrtle.

In the great unmeasured meadows the grass grew already breast-high; the buf-

faloes and the roebucks wandered through seas of flower-foam; the honeysuckle garlanded the straight pine-stems, and the cerulean clusters of the mouse-ear and the deep green fans of the nymphæa began to spread themselves between the sky and the little merry fish and the ever-chaunting frogs that filled with noise the silence of the pools and streams. All the earth was running over with foliage and blossoms and young new-born things, as the week-old fawns slept beneath the acanthus shade, and the colts gambolled on the velvet softness of the mossy glades, and the pretty little foxes ran out of their earths in the moss-covered sandstone, and the yet prettier leverets stole in their mother's wake across a bed of hyacinths blue as the sky.

The cuckoo called from the leafy heights of the esculus-oaks, and all night long the nightingale told the rosemary that she had seen nothing sweeter than itself in Egypt or in Palestine; for it is the rosemary rather than the rose that Philomel loves best.

Sometimes, when Musa came up from the shadow of the tombs into all that abounding light, that universal fragrance, that immense sense of life and loveliness, in

which she could almost hear the green earth growing, she would stretch out her arms in love of it all and gratitude, and cry out aloud to the sunlit solitude :

‘I, too, am happy ! · I, too, live !’

Every pulse of life in her rejoiced with rejoicing nature. She envied no more the water birds sailing all day beside their nests ; she no more wondered why the woodlark sang praise, praise, praise, and nothing but praise, to the Creator of all.

The joy of a strong nature is as cloudless as its suffering is desolate.

He loved her ; at least he loved her enough to have that power over her which steals all the strength away from the woman it rules, and closes her eyes in a trance.

He loved her ; and when she went out away from him into the golden air, all her life seemed to sing its joy within her ; she could have laughed aloud and have danced with the fawns in the pastures.

Even he was startled at the change and radiance that came upon her beauty ; her eyes seemed to have imprisoned the sunbeams in their depths ; her lips seemed to have ever on them that sigh of love which is happier than all smiles ; when he em-

braced her it seemed to him that he touched an Immortal.

‘You are glorious as a young goddess, he had murmured to her once; ‘and I—I am but a hunted felon, afraid to meet the light.’

Then she had laid her arms upon his shoulders, and raised her beautiful mouth to his.

‘You are my love! my love!’ she had answered him; and in the brief whisper there had been such eloquence of passion as he thought no poet’s words or musician’s melody had ever yet been able to give to sound.

When she took the flowers of the woods and put them before Joconda’s coffin, as she never forgot to do, she said always, as she kneeled a moment there:

‘Dear friend, where you are you understand; he loves me, and we are happy, and you, you will forgive?’

It seemed to her that the dead must see as God saw, with whom they were.

Her daily life was the same as it had been before. There could be but little remission of her labours, since nothing but her strength and her effort stood between

them both and death by hunger. She passed many hours of the day in her usual work ; the boat had been flung up on the shore by the Sasso Scritto not injured too much for her to repair it. She continued to fish, to spin, to hew and carry wood, to plait the *biodo*, and to cut the heath ; only he would never have her go more into the towns and villages, and so they lived as best they could on the wild oats of the last year, on the roots of the earth, and the eggs of the plover and water-hens, and when she took those she was always heedful to leave one or two in each nest.

‘ I could make nothing unhappy *now*,’ she said to herself ; and only for his sake, never for her own, would she ever have robbed the birds even thus far.

Her daily labours remained the same, but it seemed to her as if she had the strength of those Immortals he told her she resembled. She felt as though she trod on air, as though she drank the sunbeams and they gave her force like wine ; she had no sense of fatigue ; she might have had wings at her ankles and nectar in her veins. She was so happy, with that perfect happiness which only comes where the world cannot

enter, and the free nature has lifted itself to the light, knowing nothing of and caring nothing for the bonds of custom and of prejudice with which men have paralysed and cramped themselves, calling the lower the higher law.

She was as innocent as the doe was in the brakes, knowing no will but its forest lord's. Her pride had melted into willing submission as the night's frost of the Maremma dissolved before the kiss of the sun-rays at morning.

'It is not as though he were free as other men are,' she said in her communion with the memory of Joconda. 'I am all he has. Even you would never have bid me leave him.'

She longed to have delicate apparel that she might seem the fairer before him; she was tempted to set the golden grasshopper upon her bosom that she might look the lovelier to him; she would put flowers at her throat; she would take the sweet smell of the broken bay leaves on her hands; she would say to the sunbeams that could not enter the tomb, 'O come in with me that my hair may have your light!' and she would cry to the birds amongst the blossoming trees, 'O tell

me your secrets that I may sing to him a song that will never tire him.'

For her songs tired him; that she saw. He was always tired, he who could not see the face of the sun, who dared not walk across a rood of turf, who had no range but these narrow stone chambers that he paced with restless feet, as the caged lions pace their den.

He was the world to her; if she had been in the crowds of a city she would have seen but his face amidst the multitudes. In the twilight of the tombs his smile made for her a light more lovely than the morning glory of the skies; she could have lived so through years, through centuries, content.

But he—his caprice crowned, his victory assured—he began once more to weary of the long and empty days, to sigh for the ways of the world and the voices of men, to fret his soul in that dull dejection which had been roused and dissipated for a little time under the eagerness of jealousy, the excitation of failure.

'It is no fault of yours, dear,' he said once wearily, 'you do all you can. But I am a prisoner here. Though you console, you cannot change, my fate. I have

read of a bird, a great vulture, who lived in his cage, but his wings grew paralysed and hung helpless. I am like the bird. I am half paralysed. I am scarce a living man.'

Then, when he saw the great tears start into her eyes and her face grow pale, he repented and kissed her, and drew the close-curling bronze of her hair to his breast.

'Nay, I *do* live, through you. I am an ingrate to lament. Forgive me and forget it!'

But his lament echoed in her heart, and remained in his. It was the one shadow across the sunlit path of perfect joy down which her feet were going, careless of their goal. He was not free; and without freedom the sweetest fruit has a bitter taste, the clearest water has an acrid flavour.

He was not free; and she who had had power for awhile to make him oblivious of his doom soon lost that power, through no fault of her own, but merely through the seldom-varying laws of reaction that govern the man in his passion as the child with his toy.

For a short space, for a few weeks, a few months, the physical beauty of her and her

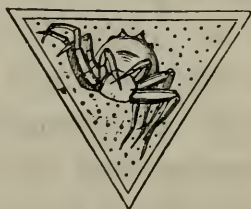
absolute devotion moved Este to some emotion that was nearly love, and so in its momentary empire possessed him and consoled him. But it took no real hold upon him, had no real power to absorb him and reconcile him to his fate; nay, his very infidelity to his dead mistress made him remember her with renewed tenderness. With his heart beating against Musa's he would think bitterly: 'Why cannot I love as I once loved? Why does all her beauty leave me cold? Why cannot I know again that old sweet madness? Alas! alas! with her—my dead queen—should I have cared whether a prison or a palace held her, should I have known where we were, so long as we were left together?'

That was all dead in him.

He knew it. Vainly he strove to call alight the fire that had died down in him; vainly he sought to persuade himself that sensual covetousness was the same thing as passion, and chill desire sweet as adoration.

Like those kings of the East, who slay living slaves to warm their own frozen veins, he had thought by sacrifice of her to make himself drunk once more with that intoxication of the soul and senses in which the despair of

his hopeless fate could be forgotten. But his heart beat but dully ; he could give but a poor, short-lived, languid gratitude to this hard-won love which merited such endless recompense. Sometimes, when he bowed his head down on Musa's breast, the bitter tears would rise under his closed eyelids, as he would think : 'If only *she* lived again ! if only once more my lips could touch her !' And he knew that she was a dead thing there in Mantua, a thing rotted out of all likeness of itself, in her grave under the marble pile in S. Andrea !





CHAPTER XLIV.

SHE had made her boat, which she had found thrown up upon the rocks, seaworthy again, and had hung a cluster of pine-cones at its bows, because Este had told her that they were the symbol of Etruscan Nethlans, the god of the deep sea.

‘He brought me back to you,’ she said, thinking of that night of peril, and, like a child as she still was in some things, she thought to please and to propitiate the Sea-king by thus hanging his emblem at her bows.

But the boat she could use little ; he did not choose she should go far afield, and her love of wandering was tamed and stilled, her world was narrowed to one human life ; she was like the nightingale that came so far,

from Persian rose fields and from Syrian cedar groves, and was content—so content!—to sit all the day long, all the spring through, in one little nest on one low bough, amidst the ploughman's spikenard and the blue borage and the prickly safety of the field ononis.

As the birds rested in their nests, so did she, and lost her wish to roam hither and thither over the far meadows stretching to the south and the dense woodlands leading to the Ciminian hills.

If he could have gone with her, indeed, then, with her hand in his, gladly would her steps have passed through the woodspurge and the trefoil and the plummy grasses whilst the blessing of the spring was upon all the land. But since he could not, dearer to her than the sunlight was the twilight of the tombs. She, to whom air was at once the nectar and the necessity of life, gave up the green and golden days without a sigh, except a sigh that he was unable to behold the radiance and smell the fragrance of them.

She was abroad for the inevitable work needful for their maintenance, but no more did she linger amidst the parnassus-grass by the pools to watch the water birds; no more

did she lie for hours on the soft wood-moss to watch the clouds move by and change. The sylvan life, the impersonal life, was over for evermore, and she deemed her loss her gain.

Since he durst not trust himself to the daylight, she stayed beside him, and let the starry squills uncurl along the shore, and the tulips spread a scarlet carpet through the meadows, and the royal asphodel uplift its sceptre to the sun, unseen by her eyes, that loved them with the poet's love.

But he could not go out into the light of day, he could not venture forth when his hunters might at every step fall on him: never a syllable escaped her of regret for that which was impossible. The world was so far from her; she knew not of it; she was a law to herself, and her whole duty seemed to her set forth in one simple word—perhaps the noblest word in human language—fidelity. When life is cast in solitary places, filled with high passions, and led aloof from men, the laws which are needful to curb the multitudes, but yet are poor conventional foolish things at their best, sink back into their true signification and lose their fictitious awe.

He and she were as utterly alone as the first human lovers in the allegory of Eden;

as in Eden, the only sin that could come nigh them would be unfaithfulness.

She lost her dread of losing him.

It seemed to her that no one could ever reach and hurt him, prayed for as he was daily, hourly, with all her soul sent up in prayer, even in those very moments when she felt most fear that there was no mercy anywhere to hear her more than the hunted doe's and the trapped redbreast's cries were heard.

He was guiltless of the crime they accused him of; she was too young to doubt that innocence was a buckler holy and impenetrable, a defence such as the gatherer of the dove-orchid is thought to hold against all foes of flesh or spirit.

It seemed to her that they might live for ever thus together, in these solemn shadows, in these twilit chambers, where nothing came of the world above save some stray beam of the sun, some echo of a bird's carol, some scent of the woodruff or the sweet herbs blossoming above. She seldom thought of the future—who does that is happy in the present?—but whenever she did so she seemed to see a long vista of the years to come, lengthening away in golden haze as

the sea-shore did, winding to the south, till it was lost in soft suffused light: she seemed to see them always. All she asked of fate was to be for ever together thus, till age or death should find them, and lay them gently down, folded in each other's arms, still in the place of their refuge where men would never behold them, but only the wandering wind would sometimes bring the flowers' message to them, and sometimes a ray of the sun would come and kiss them where they slumbered.

She could not divine the intolerable impatience that tormented him, the unutterable nausea of life that at times overcame him, so that even she only seemed to him a part of the burden of his days, a portion of the weariness that weighed him down.

He to her was as the daybreak, as the morning, as the smile of the earth in the spring-time, as the rainbow that breaks through the darkness, as the star that guides the mariner into harbour; but to him she was at best but what the humble flower growing in the stones at his feet was to the prisoner. Above her, behind her, beyond her, for ever between him and her,

there was the passion of his longing to escape, there was the vision of the world he had lost.

At times, almost he could have cried aloud to her, ‘ Better to have let me die in the canebrakes of the marshes than have kept me alive to live thus ! ’

Childlike, he had thought that, could he but break down a blossom that hung out of his reach, he would amuse himself with it all the year through, and forget how long time was, and cheat his dreary destiny by oblivion of it. But, like the child, having reached and culled the blossom, he cared little to play with it ; almost he looked with regret at what his sport had done ; almost he wished it once more out of reach, that he might once more long for it.

In their loves men often are but children ; and captious children, too.

Who thwarts them rules them best.

The time went on, like a long golden ribbon slowly unwound.

The world was transfigured to her. Now and then the fables of heaven cannot match the ecstasies of earth ; only so soon they perish, so soon they pass.

He was not content ; that was the only shadow on her path. He was restless, weary often, often impatient of the restraint, the tedium, the emptiness, of all his days.

If she could see his face and feel his touch, all the world could have added nothing to her joy ; but with him it was otherwise. His short-lived passion, violent for the time, burnt itself out quickly. What he wanted was to walk among the cities of men, to go whither he would, to hear the laughter of the streets, to move and roam, and like and hate, and change and choose, and lead the life that others led—in a word, to be free.

His captivity was like an eternal night for ever about him. For others the sun shone and the world turned, but he ate his heart out here ; and the gloom of his destiny was so great that it even stole from him all warmth out of her cheek, all delight out of her caress, and made her seem to him but a portion of the interminable weariness that enveloped him.

She was beautiful always, and to him most tender ; and the humility of a proud nature has in it a homage the most sincere and the most exquisite in flattery that

human nature holds. Yet she could never more than half console him; she could never so content him that he did not envy the brown-winged scops as it flew out at evening to wing its way over moor and marsh.

A chained creature grows cruel because of its own endless fret and pain.

He hid this from her as much as he could, conscious with shame of the ingratitude he could not control; and she was less quick to perceive it than she was to note other emotions in him, because her eyes were blinded with the celestial beauty of a love that asked for itself nothing more from earth or heaven than this life it had.

What to her were privation, alarm, toil, solitude, danger, hunger even, so long as she could hear his voice or feel his touch? They were no more than the raindrops that fall on the leaves around are to the swallow nestled by her mate in the little warm house beneath the coping of the wall.

So time slipped away; and each week, each month, brought more strength and patience and infinite adoration to her love for him; and brought more fatigue, more

irritation, more despondency at his fate to him.

This long hot summer, with its damp air, its bursts of tropical rain, its sultry perilous vapours, seemed like one tedious day to him; yet a day that would never end, but was reeled off from the wheel of destiny in horrible, perpetual, unchanging sequence.

All the thrones of the world might have been offered her, and all the anathema of all its various religions hurled at her, and she would never have left his side in that lonely chamber of shadows. But he?——

The greatness of her nature escaped him. The beauty of her sacrifice did not touch him to more than a passing emotion.

He did not see that here was a soul on which his own might rise to any heights; that here was a love which could become to him as the ‘white genius’ of the Etrurian myth.

He failed to comprehend the magnitude of her gifts to him. The reason was simple: he never really loved her.

Happily for her, she was not learned enough in passion’s vagaries to perceive that.

To her it seemed for ever wonderful that he looked for her return as the shades of evening fell with longing eyes, that he found any loveliness in her, that he forgot his dead mistress for her sake.

She was nothing in her own sight.

She was proud in some ways, but she was utterly humble in others.

She was but a moorland thing in her own sight, no higher than the loosestrife or the woodspurge was, just fed with sun and dew, and born out of the soil where she took root.

If she were, indeed, fair to see as he and the others said, it was only, like the flowers, by the grace of nature and the smile of heaven. Her character was moulded on too grand lines for any vanity to find place to lurk in it, and that selfishness which is the safeguard and armour of all average women was also absent from her.

It is often said that the strong cannot love the weak, the high-tempered courage cannot cling to the coward; yet it is rather the strong who alone can love the weak, who can have the patience, the pity, the abiding tenderness to bear with feebleness, so unlike itself; it is rather the high courage

that can stoop, and, full of infinite compassion, feel that where others despise it can defend, and comprehend what has been made in its own unlikeness.

Moreover, love is for ever unreasoning, and the deepest and most passionate love is that which survives the death of esteem.

Friendship needs to be rooted in respect, but love can live upon itself alone. Love is born of a glance, a touch, a murmur, a caress; esteem cannot beget it, nor lack of esteem slay it. *Questi che mai da me non fia diviso*, shall be for ever its consolation amidst hell. One life alone is beloved, is beautiful, is needful, is desired: one life alone out of all the millions of earth. Though it fall, err, betray, be mocked of others and forsaken by itself, what does this matter?—this cannot alter love. The more it is injured by itself, derided of men, abandoned of God, the more will love still see that it has need of love, and to the faithless will be faithful.

‘You love me as angels might love!’ he said once to her, roused to some momentary sense of wonder, recognition, gratitude.

Sometimes she seemed to him, indeed,

like some grand young angel leaning down over his weakness. Sometimes that ineffable tenderness, so inexhaustible, so divine, which was in her oppressed and daunted him. It seemed to lay a burden on his life, on his conscience.

If she had but been as other women are, captious, changeful, impatient, uncertain, he would not have felt this vague fear of her which seldom left him, blindly subject to him though she was. Her patience was so perfect, her love was so intense, that at times he felt humbled and unworthy before her, and would cry to her angrily, ‘Why make a god of me? I have brought you nothing but woe. Chafe me, deride me, upbraid me, then perhaps I shall love you always—men are made so.’

Those bitter words hurt her without her understanding them.

Her tongue could not have framed a rough word to him. The harmless cunning of feminine wiles was as far away from her as the fret of cities was distant from her calm green woodlands and her solitary shores. As soon could a Greek marble of Electra have stooped to coquetry as she.

‘If you would but offend me that I

might quarrel with you,' he said once, half in jest. She smiled because he did, but she did not comprehend.

Ah! the fair hours! he thought, when in Mantua he and his love had quarrelled almost to rupture, and black jealousy had been there to sting to life the waning passions, and the burning rage of mutual reproach had melted into the amorous delight of reconciliation, and the gall-apple bitten through had made sweeter the honey of delight.

Unholy memories, base gladness, this he knew, yet he sighed for them.

These grand eyes of Musa, these lips that were always mute unless they spoke in blessing, made him feel feeble, ungenerous, unworthy. Her very silence on it made his debt the greater—too great—it weighed love down.

The spring waned and grew summer, the plains of corn became yellow and ruddy, and the bearded grain fell to the hundreds of sickles reaping there, as to thousands of scythes the high grass had dropped in the May-time. The flocks and the herds wended their way to the cool mountains; the days were long and glowed with heat.

The old summer silence, the old summer solitude, were come again; the crickets laughed in all the grass and all the trees, and she was happy because the land was lonely, left to him and her, shared only by the blithe birds and the innocent beasts.

She began to lose the fear of his arrest. As the calm days and weeks glided by they brought by their tranquil recurrence a sense of safety with them. The season of peril had passed, and the sun now put a zone of torrid heat and dazzling light about their refuge, and the fever mists that to others were terror were to her as a welcome wall risen up between them and mankind.

The long, deep, unbroken stillness of the Maremma day was sweet to her in this midsummer time, when even the lusty, full-throated merle was tired of song, and, except the hum of insect life and the mirth of the tree-frogs, there was no sound at all throughout the land from sunrise until sunset. Into the tomb of the Lucumo the heat of the upper air could not penetrate greatly: there was a drowsy warmth in it, no more. Whilst even the moor-hen was hot amongst the mat-grass, and even the eagle flew with languid wing over the olive woods of the

hills, in the Etruscan grave it was cool and twilight always.

Once she went to the shore to gather mussels and take them home for him ; they would cook in the wood-ashes, and he would tell her the while of Petronius, of Apicius, of Lucullus, of all that luxurious life of Rome, of Greater Greece, and of the *otiosa Neapolis*.

She took off her shoes and kilted her skirt, and waded almost knee-deep in the shallow sea-water, while the shore beside her was fragrant with the rosemary and the southernwood, and the seapinks were blowing like little puffs of rosy cloud, and a kingfisher, all azure and emerald in the sun, did not fly away at her approach, but went on with his own fishing and meditations.

She gathered her harvest of the sea, and found a few oysters, too, in amongst the rocks and the sea-fennel. The water was blue as the kingfisher's breast, a sweet west wind was stirring it ; in the clear air Elba stood forth like a giant's castle in tales of magic ; above head the rock-doves and the rock-martins were wheeling and soaring amongst the golden motes of the sunbeams.

It was early, and all was still. There was not even a sail on the horizon.

She waded on to the sand, out of the water, and leaned to rest against a great boulder of ruddy tufa, putting her creel down beside her.

She wore one of those straw hats bell-shaped like the hat of Hermes, which still, with the shepherd's crook and the shepherd's reed-pipe, and the water-jar balanced on the women's heads, and the attitudes of the half-nude, symmetrical, and supple limbs, recall the statues of Pheidias and of Cleomenes to the student as he wanders here, wherever the lands are lonely and the goats crop the wild thyme.

With one hand resting on the rock behind her, and her feet lightly crossed and glistening with the yellow sand and the sea-water, she looked out over the broad blue heaving plain of light, and thought with grateful heart of that terrible night when the sea had devoured her and released her.

How dark it had been that night! 'Dark with the thoughts of the Lord,' as a Russian poet has said of the night on the steppes of Ukraine. She had died and

come to life again. She had descended into the grave of the deep waters, and been delivered by the hand that she loved.

Her heart swelled with emotion and was thankful as she looked through the sunlight on the sea which had been thus merciful.

How the black wall of water had risen and towered above her! how the foam of it had hissed, and boiled, and seethed! How impenetrable had been the cruel starless skies! how deep and how hoarse the thunder of the storm!

She remembered it, and recalled it with a thrill of awful pleasure, as a child that has been lost, lying safely in his little bed at home, will recall the terrors of the unknown roads and unknown faces that scared him on his way.

Absorbed in those memories, she did not hear a boat approach through the water and ground on the sand, as that of Sanctis had done in the winter noon.

Before she had heard any sound about her, Daniello Villamagna had come beside her.

It was seven months since she had left him standing by the sea-wall by the salt lagoon of Orbetello. Since then he had

made another voyage; this time to the surly Flemish coast, to the grey cloudy Scheldt, carrying his rich amber and green Sicilian fruit through the snowstorms and the north winds of the great waves that Scandinavia and Iceland sent rolling in to the Low Country shores.

He was paler and thinner than before, but his eyes were bright and full of eagerness.

‘I have found you once more!’ he cried to her. ‘Ah! do not move, do not go away, you hurt me. Why will you mistrust me?’

All the softness had gone out of her face, and all the light had gone, too, as soon as she had seen him. He was nothing to her but another danger, another difficulty, another trouble the more.

‘I do not mistrust you,’ she said, remembering how he had lent her his boat and bade his boatswain not follow her. ‘I think you are a loyal man; sailors are always loyal. But I am sorry that you do not forget me, and cease to come after me, for though you should so come for twenty years, never shall I say you are welcome.’

Pain and anger both swept over his

handsome face, as a cloud sweeps over a landscape.

‘I have been seeking you many days, he said, ‘to and fro, up and down the coast. I came back from the Flemish seas last month. It was bad weather for the most part; the snowstorms were many. Sometimes the rigging of my brig was hung with icicles. The winter is long in those parts, as long as the summer with us. I think they never see a sunbeam, save such as the oranges we take them have caught on their rinds of gold. You do not listen. I could tell you many things that would divert you, but you will not listen. Well, only hear me say this: I took the memory of you with me all the way over those cold seas. When my men shivered in the frost, I said to myself, “it is not so cold as were her unkind words.” I have not looked a woman in the eyes since last I saw you yonder by the *stagno*. Nay, that I swear——’

‘Look at whom you will,’ said Musa, angrily, ‘only look not at me——’

He pursued his discourse, unheeding her displeasure, though it struck him hardly.

‘If you had been with me, the life

would have pleased you ; it is good. It is good to go and see those poor muffled wretches who scarce ever feel the sun and move like ghosts about beneath their fogs ; and then to come back to see our own shores, where all the sunshine is, and where the very moon makes us a second day, and where the lutes sound half the night, and the olive grows down to the sea, and in winter all the air is full of the smell of the orange-flower and of the coltsfoot in the grass.'

She gave an impatient movement as he paused, but he pursued the thread of his own thoughts aloud.

'If you had only come ! It is at you only that I look. Though I have not seen your face seven long months, it has been with me always. Out of the grey and yellow fog you seemed to beckon me. Oh, yes ! I know well you never do, you never even wish to see me. But I—I love you so well it seems to me that some time or another I must bring you to care a little. I am not much myself, though women have smiled on me before now ; but the ship is a good ship, and will cradle you safely on the waves—and

you love the sea—and down on my Sicilian shore I would make you a nest as the lory makes his amongst the orange-trees, and your nest should be all amongst the white orange and lemon flowers, and overhang the waves so that you should be able to see the coral and the fish of the deep water, just leaning from your balcony. When I heard the church-bells ringing inland as I went along the black, wintry, bitter coast, it was for you I prayed. I took my good ship into her dock, and then I came back here to find you. Why will you not say something gentler? To love you is no offence.'

'You have seen me twice!'

'When I had seen you once it was enough: I love you, and I was not afraid——'

He was thinking of the fierce Mastarna blood which he knew ran in her veins; he was thinking, 'though I knew that she would live to plunge a knife into my breast, yet would I make her mine—if I could, if I could.'

She heard him with pain and with anger. Her whole nature had softened and changed under the influence of a great passion as

bronze melts under the flames. She was more able to feel sorrow for him than she had been before in the unthinking hardness of her ignorance of love. But she was still offended, troubled, and perplexed.

She was silent awhile, watching the motionless body of the kingfisher glancing like a jewel in the sun. The sailor watched her as she stood erect on the edge of the waves.

He thought to himself, should he tell her of Saturnino? Should he tell her whence she took her grand luminous eyes, her passion for freedom, her strength of body and spirit?

But how should she believe him if he did?

How should he persuade her that he spoke the truth? And how much it would wound her, humble her, make her ashamed, to know herself the daughter of that galley-slave, that mountain thief, that murderer, whom she had abhorred whilst she had pitied him! He dared not; she would but hate him himself the more.

He said to her only: 'Do you remember that day by the *stagno*, when you were sorry to see the brigand of Santa Fiora working like an ox in a yoke?'

‘Yes ; I remember that. He got away, they said, and was eaten by the sharks.’

‘He got away, but he lives still. It was I who made his escape possible. He threw himself from the sea-wall and swam ; I picked him up ; in the darkness no one saw my boat. I carried him across to Sardinia, where men of his blood live in the forests and on the hills. I did it for you, because you pitied him.’

‘You did a brave thing,’ she said, and almost she smiled at him, and his heart was glad.

‘I did it for you,’ he said, and hesitated. Should he tell her ?

‘He was a bad man,’ she answered. ‘He was a murderer and a thief many times. But chained there I felt sorry for him, though he did betray me and steal the gold.’

‘What gold ?’ said the mariner quickly.

‘Gold that was trusted to me,’ she said, remembering how nearly she had betrayed herself.

‘The gold of the Etruscan grave ?’ he said.

The blood went out of her lips with fear.

‘How did you know of that?’ she asked, with terror at her heart.

‘Saturnino himself told me. He told me that you showed him a place in the earth—a *buca delle fate*—and that there were gold toys there and armour, and he stole them, and they led to his own undoing.’

‘As he merited,’ she said between her lips. She breathed again at ease, remembering that Saturnino had not known she lived there.

‘Did ever he speak to you of one who escaped with him,’ she asked, desiring to know the worst; ‘a noble, sentenced for murder, for whom reward is offered?’

‘No; he never spoke of him. Why?’

‘There would be money to be made if you knew where he was,’ she said, with the subtlety of her race, which ran side by side with their bold passions.

‘I am not a bloodhound to track him,’ said Daniello Villamagna, with contempt. ‘No, I know nought of him, and would not use my knowledge if I did. Nor would you, I think?’

‘They offer money,’ said Musa, with feigned avarice; ‘but I, too, am not a spy.’

‘If you love money, look at this,’ said the sailor, deceived by her apparent greed.

He brought out from the breast of his shirt a little case, and in the case was a necklace made of that fine gold, *lavorato a sfoglia*, for which Sicilian goldsmiths are still famous as they were in the old Greek days.

She looked at it with a smile.

‘It is pretty. You will give it to your *dama*.’

‘I brought it for you,’ he said, with the timidity of true love making his voice tremble and his brown hand shake.

‘For me! Ah, I am not like Saturnino of Santa Fiora. I care nothing for trinkets. Go you back with it to your island and give it there to some one who will smile at you. As for me, I have no time to idle with you; I am going home——’

‘You will not take it?’

‘Certainly I will not.’

He threw the case, with the necklace in it, by a sweep of his arm far out into the sea.

The kingfisher, startled at the splash, rose and took wing regretfully.

‘The sea has enough treasure without yours,’ said Musa with indifference. ‘You scared the bird——’

For the first time he lost patience, and a fierce oath escaped him.

‘You have no more heart than a stone,’ he said bitterly, as Este once had said it.

She did not answer, but took up her creel with the mussels and oysters in it.

‘Where do you live?’ he said abruptly.

‘That I shall not tell you.’

That she dwelt in the tombs never occurred to his thoughts. Saturnino had spoken of the place as a hole in the earth, and he himself had only guessed that from containing gold toys it was some Etruscan burial-place. He had heard of such.

‘You will not tell me?’ he said in his teeth. ‘Then I will find out for myself.’

She did not reply; she thought how the kingfisher blinds and baffles men to where his underground home is made: surely she could do as much as the birds did. Yet a great dread was at her heart; it would be hard to rid herself of this persistent wooer.

At last a thought struck her, and she looked him full in the face.

‘What can it matter to you where I live? Leave me in peace. You should be too proud to come where you are undesired. As for the other things that you

say, thus much I will tell you: I dwell with one I love. All the rest of the world may die—for me.'

There was no colour on her face as she spoke, and no tremor in her voice; she looked him full in the eyes, calmly and coldly; there was sternness and repose in her look. So might Fate itself have spoken.

He grew as pale as though she had struck him a blow which he could not return.

He drew back a step or two, and gazed at her with pain which would have been pathetic to her if she had had any sight or thought to give to him.

'All the rest of the world may die—for me.'

The words seemed to go through him and slay every hope and fancy in him: then and for evermore. They were so entirely the expression of a passion that was only so tranquil because it was so absolute. All in a moment he felt broken, bruised, grown old. His youth all at once seemed to slip away from him, never to return.

'Is that so?' he said at last. 'Then truly have I nothing to do here. I thought

your heart white marble, on which no hand had writ any name; and why, I thought, why not write mine—but to you, no doubt, I look mad.’

Then, with those halting words, so inadequate and feeble to utter what he felt, he reached with a stride his little boat, and launched it and plunged his oars into the water.

The jutting wall of the Sasso Scritto in another moment or two hid him from sight.

He was gone over the silent pathway of the sea; while the gold of his necklace hung five fathoms down upon a branch of coral, amongst the gliding incurious fish and the strange foliage of the deep-water weeds.

Neither to the trinket nor to him did she give a regret. She lifted the creel of mussels on her shoulder, and stepped out with wet feet and lightened heart over the sand homeward.





CHAPTER XLV.

IN the grey river-clay that she brought for Este with arduous toil from the bed of the Ombrone river, he had made in the twilight of his sombre and solitary workroom a full-sized statue of her. He had a facile talent, and here, where it was his only solace, his sole pursuit, he had achieved a certain greatness of conception; and freedom and grace were both in the work of his hand.

When she came in that day, he stopped her with a gesture.

‘Ah, how like you are to my image of you,’ he said, with an artist’s pleasure in his own creation.

In his statue he had made her with nude feet and arms, fresh come from the

sea, with the bronze *aryballos* poised upon her head, as he had seen her stand a hundred times before him. On the rough clay of the base he had scratched *Glaucia* as her name. His work was both graceful and noble; it had truth to nature and a beautiful youthfulness in it. He who had only idled now and then with clay in the Lombard studios of friendly students was both amazed and proud that he could now call so much life out of the grey earth that the Ombrone washed daily towards the sea.

‘Is it like me, indeed?’ she said for the twentieth time as she looked timidly at it. ‘I see my bare feet, and the ribbon-weed in the sand, and the bronze jar; but all the rest—can it be like me?’

And he told her for the twentieth time—

‘It is like you if grey clay can be like a living flower.’

She looked at it doubtingly, unable to believe in any flattery so sweet as this. Then she said to him:

‘You will be glad to know that Saturnino Mastarna has got safe away from Orbetello; he has crossed over to Sardinia;

it is an island, you know, a big one; we can see it very far away, like a cloud, and the flamingoes come from there, they say.'

'Who told you?'

'A man upon the shore.'

A certain sensitiveness—rather for him than for the lover she had rejected—made her shrink from saying that a man who was free to woo her had spoken to her of love that day. She was afraid to rouse his jealousy.

Este ceased to look at the statue; his face grew overcast, he sighed with impatience.

'He can go, and the flamingoes, and the swallows, and the falcons,' he said bitterly; 'only I must stay! How did he get away?'

'The boat of a friend took him; he sprang from the sea-wall in the dark, as the gang left off their night-work.'

'I should have been better there than here; then I too might have taken that leap.'

'And I?' said the eyes of Musa; but her voice said nothing.

Was it of this he was always thinking? To escape, to get away, to go elsewhere? Was this home, that was as dear to her

as its hole in the rock to the cliff-pigeon, only to him but a prison the more?

‘That brute, cursed with a thousand crimes, can get free!’ he muttered. And I shall rot away my whole life in a hole in the rocks, and hear the feet of men go by above in the grass! And there is no blood on *my* hands!’

She looked at him in awe and pain.

‘I thought you would be glad, for his sake,’ she said wistfully, and then added, with a quiver of exceeding tenderness in her voice: ‘For me, I wish all his crimes forgiven him; he sent you here.’

That exquisite softness of meaning and of accent passed by him; he was envying the freed man his flight across the sea to that mysterious isle, where, safe in the darkness of immemorial forests, the wild beasts still live in peace.

‘If you had never seen me, it would have been well for you,’ he said, with a sudden sense of self-reproach.

‘When you are content, it *is* well with me; so well!’ she said softly.

The very tenderness of the answer galled him; he passed it over.

‘Saturnino did not mean you well,’ he

said bitterly. 'He said to me—"a fawn's throat is soon slit."' '

'That was only because he has been a bad man, and cruel all his years, and his knife always ready. He knew well that you would not hurt me.'

'Have I not hurt you? Heaven pardon me!' he murmured, and he kissed her.

Sometimes he seemed in his own sight what men would have called him—a base coward.

'You hurt me when I think you wish yourself away,' she said timidly under her breath; and he said to her in answer:

'Nay, not away from you, but free to go out into the light, free to feel the wind on my face, and hear the stir of the world once more. Ah, dear! if they had opened his cage door for that vulture that I told you of, I think he would have found strength, even in his paralysed wings, to rise and go.'

'Perhaps,' she said simply, and said no more.

But that night, in her sleep, she sobbed bitterly, and she dreamed that she watched a flock of flamingoes, as she had watched one many a time, going westward, rose-red against the blue sky, and she

thought that their wings were so ruddy of hue because they had been dipped in her own heart's blood, and she grew fainter and fainter the further they flew, and when they were lost to sight in the gold haze of the sun, then her life went from her and she sank down and died.

In Mantua that night, an old man sat writing in an ancient house looking on the Lago di Mezzo, and having its foundations sunk deep down amongst the reeds and osiers and the shifting sands. There was no sound but such as came from the hoarse chorus of the frogs that thronged the lake, and now and then a bittern's call or an owl's hoot. In the city, now dark with the gloom of a moonless midnight, the white marble of a mausoleum, with a lamp burning ever before it, was shut away behind the stately doors of the noble church of S. Andrea; and that tomb, with its guardian angels, was raised to the memory of his wife, who had died young whilst he was old. What he wrote now at the leather-covered table, by the light of oil wicks burning feebly, was his own confession that he had killed her with a dagger which her lover had left in her chamber in carnival time.

A pale-faced foreigner had haunted his steps for weeks and months, had traced all his past years almost hour by hour, had pieced together a million fragments of infinitesimal evidence, fine as dust, that thus assembled made a tale written on granite; had found out old servants, and made them speak in secrecy under their oath; and when the proof was so complete and overwhelming that no denial of or escape from it was possible, had come straight to the worthy judge of the civil court whom Mantua revered, and had said to him four words, only :

‘ You were the murderer.’

With the eye of a trained man of the law, the masked assassin knew at a glance that there was no loophole of escape for him; that this pale stranger, come he knew not whence, and working to what end he could not tell, had pulled down all his careful fabric of fraud and falsehood, and hemmed him in between two stone walls of evidence.

He confessed: seeing in that act some paltry chance of life and public pity, and wrote out his confession and signed it.

When on the morrow he was in the

hands of justice, and conveyed to the prisons of the city, the task of Maurice Sanctis was over, the gift that he would give to Este was complete. Greater gift than this of freedom can no man give to another.

‘I myself will tell him,’ he thought, on the eve of that memorable day when the people of Mantua gathered about the marble tomb of Donna Aloysia, and talked in the narrow contrade of the city of this strange tragedy which had come in fresh guise to their mouths to help them pass the long, hot, empty hours.

But that night Mantua, as though jealous that a stranger from beyond the snowy mountains on the Lombard frontier should have come there to seize its secrets from out of its dark old palaces, that have seen so many crimes and kept so many mysteries untold, Mantua, as though angered against him, poured into his throat the poison of her subtle vapours, of her fever mists, that lurk for ever amidst her long fields of reeds and her pale-gleaming water-meadows.

That night he fell ill.

With morning he had almost lost con-

sciousness. The people where he lodged, being frightened, called in Italian leeches, who, true to their school, drew blood from the body that needed all its strength, and then did little else. Without them his constitution might have done battle with the disease and conquered it, but, bled to utter weakness, he had no force left in him to resist the destroying power of that fatal and insidious venom.

By the part he had taken in the detection and accusation of Donna Aloysia's husband, the city had learned his name and his place in art and fame; but wiser science was too late summoned: he died on the fifth night, before even his own people could come to him from over the mountains.

His window was open to the wide waters, to the bulrush-thickets, to the slow-gliding Mincio that had given him his death: at this last hour, some sense returned to him, and he strove in agony to speak, gasping for breath the while.

But the utter blank of death soon came upon him, and he perished miserably, with only hirelings and strangers about him, as the midnight hours were tolled from the

belfries, and the moon-rays slanting across the water fell through the casement of what had once been Donna Aloysia's chamber, and gleamed on the old gold of the baldacchino above the empty bed.





CHAPTER XLVI.

THE summer passed on and entered the sign of the lion once again, and more than a year had gone since that night when she had come down the steps of the tombs and found a nameless fugitive seated by her hearth. All the summer, since he had forbade her going into the towns to sell her work, they had had but little food. It was the season of the year when the woods yielded the least, when it was hardest without going far afield to get enough to make even a slender meal. The wild oats indeed she had cut and threshed and kept; but such grain is unpalatable, and yields but little nutrition, and ill sustains the strength of a man.

Her old carking care came back on her ;

she saw that he grew paler again and thinner, and a terror seized her lest again the miasma of the land should take hold of him in his weakness. So strong was this fear, so vivid were her memories of that awful fever fiend with which he had wrestled, half-dead, so long, that she passionately besought him to grant her leave to go and sell her store of work and bring him back food and wine.

He himself began to see that they could not long continue to live thus, and let an unwilling assent be wrung from him. After all, too, he cared less. She had a lovely face, but he had looked on it so long that he knew its every line by heart, and thought he could have moulded it in clay with his eyes shut.

She was always there; that was her only fault to him. Perhaps it was the most fatal fault of all.

Therefore he let her go on this errand without objection, and bade her take with her a few of the trifles he had modelled: he fancied they might bring in a few pence.

She could not bear to leave him for a day, but she knew not what else to do. There was no one she could seek aid from

within reach, nor could she have trusted any living creature with his secret.

She could not see him waste away for the bare need of food, and she was well aware how the poison mists that rose at sunset from every morass and every stream seized on empty viscera and impoverished blood.

She clung about his throat, and kissed him with tender passion ; then she went.

She had lost her buoyant vigour of movement ; she had felt unwell the last few weeks and did not know what ailed her ; but she summoned her courage and her strength, walked to the coast, and there set sail in her little boat, that had the pine-bough at its prow. The morning was fine and calm ; the sea was blue and so were the skies ; there was no chance of foul weather. It would have been nearer to have crossed the country on foot to Telamone ; but she did not feel as strong as usual, and the linen she had spun and the matting she had made were heavy to carry.

The sea was quiet ; there was wind enough to fill her little sail, and what there was favoured her. Under the easy motion of the boat, with the play of air

and light around, she recovered her natural spirit; she sat and steered and now and then thrust an oar in the water, that was all. She wanted to make all the haste she could; she longed to be at home again, carrying home good food and the red wine that is man's strength.

She sailed in over the seaweed and the sand of the choked-up bay of Telamone under the shadow of its castle on the rock. She moored her boat hastily and went into the sorry place to try her fortune. The townspeople, such a few as they were, would buy nothing; but there chanced to be there a pedlar who had known her as a child in the house of Joconda. He was one of those who bring goods and news together from the outer world into Maremma, and round whose packs the housewives and the gossips gather eagerly.

He was jovial, and not more unjust than trade makes all traders, great and small. He bought all she had of spun linen at a fair price, and being a man who knew the bigger towns and their tastes, and went about with his merry eyes open, he discerned at a glance the talent and grace of the clay images, and bought them

also and shut them in his wooden brass-bound box. Then he persuaded a huckster of the coast to take her matting too, and altogether made her passing rich.

‘Nay, I knew Joconda forty years,’ he said, ‘and a good soul she was, though silent as a clapperless bell, but good and sturdy and honest, and hospitable always if she had but a crust.’

Then, being a chattering man, a bell with more clapper to it than was needful, he would ask her many questions, all of which embarrassed her to answer. She replied at random, vaguely, longing to get away, and buy what she had come for, and set sail again. But the pedlar was not easily denied, and chattered on; and then out of a dirty lane came Andreino, who had pulled himself over in his old punt from Santa Tarsilla to speak *sub rosâ* of some tobacco he had received contraband from fishers of the French coast, and which he was willing to sell, as he usually sold such good consignments, to the parish priest of Telamone.

Andreino would be chatted with as well, and listened to, and was curious, and hard to pacify, as he hobbled by her side to the edge of the shallow anchorage.

Had she come by the sea? Was she living as far off as the foundries, then? No? Under the mountains? Then why come by sea? She looked grand and proud; a little pale, but quite a woman now. Had she no wooers? Was she still the Musoncella? Well, time would cure her of that. And then the sly old man looked at her sideways, and said with a low chuckle:

‘And the youth that was sick, my dear? Do you make the *muso* to him too? Eh—eh? I fancy not! Well, pluck your cherries while they are ripe; the cherry-time soon passes.’

The only answer she gave him was the hot blush that came over all her face, and he chuckled the more.

Then all at once he said to her:

‘There is a fine piece of news put up all down the coast. But no doubt, my dear, you have seen it; though in that cherry-time I talked of most of you are blind. But if you do know that stray dog, you may as well get the reward for him.’

‘A stray dog?’ she repeated. She was ready to help any dog, for sake of dead Leone.

‘A dog that will pay well,’ said the old man with a grin. ‘You can read; I have only heard tell of it; look, it is up on the tower there.’

The south wall of the old martello tower in which the coastguard had of yore been located had a large white placard on it, covered with printed letters that were only confused lines and dots of black from where Andreino was sitting. It was but a step to the wall, and she went up to the proclamation.

What she read, printed there, was the declaration of the pardon of the State to an innocent man, in the common formula of the law.

The published words stated that one, Count Luitbrand d’Este, had been cleared of the imputed crime of blood-guiltiness by the confession, made in Mantua, of Ser Piero di Albano, who had acknowledged himself to have been the assassin of his wife, Donna Aloysia Gorgias; and who had further declared that he had planned and carried out the assassination in such wise that the accusation of it should fall upon his wife’s lover, and be his vengeance of their adultery.

It proceeded to declare that whereas, by due surrender before the courts of law, Piero di Albano had declared himself the assassin of his wife, therefore he who had been accused of and punished for the crime of Donna Aloysia's murder was now declared innocent and free of law; and whosoever might have seen him living, or heard of him dead, was bidden under penalty to report their knowledge to the State.

The print said, further, that a large reward would be paid to whosoever should either give information of the whereabouts of the Count d'Este, escaped from the Isle of Gorgona two years before, or proof of his death, if it had been known to take place.

She read this, standing in the sunshine, with the wall before her, and about her the buzz of the people's voices.

She stood gazing stupidly at the white sheet fastened up there upon the old, red, peeling, heat-cracked bricks.

Then the sea and the earth seemed to heave and rise up before her, as they do in an earthquake, and a great darkness came down, as from heaven, over her eyes.

The world was gained for him ; but he was lost for her.

He would go away !

That was the one thought standing out from the blackness which seemed to have fallen over her like a veil flung by some unseen hand.

Then, quick as a snake darts out of its hole in the ground, another thought crossed and supplanted that one. She remembered that unless she told him he would never know.

Not a soul but herself and Maurice Sanctis knew that he lived. Not a tongue save theirs could tell of his hiding-place. Not a living creature would he ever dare to accost ; no human eyes would ever behold him.

With the instinctive concealment of her race, which is in the Latin temper side by side with so much fire and fury, she turned from the wall with no evidence of any emotion on her face or in her voice.

‘The law makes blunders, and people suffer them,’ she said simply to Andreino, who shrugged his shoulders despairingly.

‘They say the law is never wrong,’ he answered, ‘but were I that young man, I

would have some one's blood for being shut up and chained, and all for nought. If he be living anywhere, methinks he will find out his unjust judge and kill him.'

'Perhaps,' said Musa; but she did not hear his words; they were like the burr of the water running underneath the old stone piers, where some fisher folk were busy setting their lobster-pots in the shallows.

Her head was throbbing quickly; all before her eyes seemed blood-red; at her ear there was a sound like some one whispering, 'why should he know? why should he know?'

When he knew, he would go away.

With the profound humility which is the characteristic of all great love, she knew at once that he would go; she never doubted for a moment that she would have no power to hold him.

She did not reason on it, or frame it in any conscious formula, but her reason told her that he would go, once learning he was free.

Yet she bade Andreino a good-day in a steady voice, threw her packages into the boat, and set sail homeward.

The old man looked after the little vessel as it went over the waves, dipping and righting itself with pretty ease.

‘Her lover cannot be that missing youth of Mantua,’ he thought, ‘or never would she have taken it so quietly. A great reward, and a *damo* with a title to his name! Nay, nay, such good luck would have turned her head. She used to be in heaven when one but gave her a silly flower or a shell.’

The boat went over the sea homeward.

It was now high noon.

The sea sparkled, blue as woodland pimpernels, and ran merrily from under her bows.

She was hardly conscious of anything she did: she steered straight by sheer force of habit, not seeing either the sky or the water, either the pale white coast or the dusky belt of the pines that divided the beach from the hills.

When the boat was beneath the Sasso Scritto, she ran it ashore, left it lying on the sand, with the wine and the flour in it forgotten, and took her course over the

familiar moor and marsh and pasture lying steaming in the sun.

Grey and opal hues were cast over the land by passing clouds; where some herds were crossing it, a cloud of dust rose, dusky and curled like smoke.

She traversed the well-known ways. The sky and the earth seemed whirling round her. Her feet moved without her knowing it. Her body seemed one great pulse, beating, beating, beating.

She never thought of his innocence being made known; had she not always known it? What she thought of only was this: as soon as he was told, he would go.

Need he ever be told?

She held him as one holds a bird in the hollow of the hand.

If she never unclosed her hand, he would never go.

No, he need never be told: she said so to herself as she walked: never, never.

If her mouth were shut, no other could speak. He was hers, as the dead are the earth's.

She could keep him close here, hers only, hers absolutely. Was he not hers, purchased by all that she could give, won

from the very edge of death, wrestled for long with sickness and pain, and possessed and adored?

But for her he had been ere now a lifeless creature, fallen under some tangle of mastic, some bush of marucca, eaten by the hogs of the brake and the marsh, picked bare to the bone by the birds of Maremma; no more than any rotting lizard or carcase of a buffalo dead of drought.

She was but a wild creature of the moors herself, with something noble in her instincts born there as in a dog's, and with something of strength and faithfulness taught her by Joconda.

Her first impulses were of passion and of possession.

He was hers, here, in the shadowy caverns of the earth. Why should she lose him to the world of light, that unknown world where she had neither place nor part?

His water-city that he loved; the women leaning from their lattices, with the pearls braided in their hair; the hum of strange towns, the stir and strife of streets, the laughter and the music, the learning and the love, the jocund

comedy and bitter tragedy that jostle each other on the stage of life—why should these become her rivals? She could not contend with them; they were to her known only through his words; they were mere phrases to her, but she feared them.

She vaguely pictured, beyond the opaline horizon of her plains, brilliant and shadowy hosts, dream-cities, golden gates of ivory palaces, faces of women lovely as the opening blossoms of the lily and the rose. Why should she yield him up to these?

She walked across the width of white sunshine shining on the dust, and said in her heart: ‘I will never tell; I will never tell.’

She was not conscious of any treachery in her resolve; she had only the barbarian’s instinct to hold and keep.

They were so happy; so it seemed to her. She would have wanted nothing more all her life long than to live on in that solitude, and spin, and weave, and hunt, and fish, and bake bread, all for him, enough repaid by a caress, a murmur, even a mere glance.

She walked with dull step and heavily-throbbing heart over the sunburnt earth.

The many miles seemed like a rood, yet they cost treble the time to traverse than ever they had cost her before.

The old joy with which she had always seen the brown swell of the uplands, the blasted stem of the big cork tree, was all gone. She was afraid to see them now, the burden of this knowledge being shut up in her breast.

It seemed to her as if iron were bound about her ankles; the placid, drowsy amber light seemed like a wall of steel between herself and him. Without knowing what she feared, she was afraid to look upon his face with this secret withheld.

They had always met each other as simply, as naturally, as two blossoms that blow together in the summer breeze, as two children that run to meet and play. But already the shadow of the thing she knew, and would not reveal, went before her, and would stand like a ghost from the grave between his life and her own.

The heat was very great; it was a heat as if the fires, burning in the woods and on the mountains, had coursed down in streams of flame and licked up all the beauty of the earth as prairie-fires do.

It was only the scorch from the blaze of the sun at his zenith, but it was terrible. The very toads were panting, sunk downward in the lowest deeps of the pools. The buffaloes and the boars buried themselves low in beds of canes and cotton-grass; the birds were all still; only the tree-frog shouted in the shrubs, and the snake lay basking and happy on the sand; the wild mares and their foals could scarce drag one hoof after another; but she was insensible to the sun-rays, that darted at her like arrows red-hot, and lapped her with tongues of flame, and lay on all the land around her like a plague.

She thought only of this secret she carried in her brain. Would he whom she loved not read it in her eyes?

She would never tell him.

That fierce tenacity which was in her blood, as it had been in Saturnino's, fastened on to the one resolve and clung to it.

For the time all that was passionate, violent, fierce, selfish, held their sway, and all she thought of was to hold and keep him, as the child in the cruelty of his possession holds the poor bird it loves until it dies strangled in his embrace.

For the time she did not even realise that what she would do was base. She only remembered that he was hers, that if the world took him he would be hers no more.

Yet, though she was not fully conscious of the treachery she meditated, all the speed and gladness with which hitherto she had always flown homeward to him had gone from her heart and from her feet.

She went on more slowly than her wont across the grass; unwillingness to look upon his face had taken the fleetness from her steps. Without her consciousness of it, this secret which she would keep, this wrong that she meant to do, was already a barrier between herself and him.

When she had drawn quite near the myrtle-brake above the place of the tomb, she stopped, and for the first time in all her life she trembled. If he should read what she had seen upon her face!

With a desperate hand she pushed away the brambles and went down into their place of refuge.

Even here in the heart of the soil the heat had penetrated. The air even underground was heavy and warm, and with little power

in it to refresh the panting lungs of man or beast.

In the outer chamber, where the most air came, Este was lying asleep.

He was cast down for coolness on the stone bier where once she had seen the king lie in his armour of gold. He looked like a dead man. He was very pale, his chest scarcely heaved as he breathed, his lips were close shut, his long lashes rested on his wasted cheeks.

The loose shirt he wore fell off his breast and showed the emaciated bones, and the feeble yet feverish beating of his heart. In his noonday sleep he looked exhausted, hopeless, heart-broken.

Suddenly, as if it were written in letters of fire above his head, she saw the truth : that what was her home was but his prison, that what was her heaven was but at best a living death to him.

Without awaking him she went away and climbed again into the upper air ; and there, where the marucca and myrtle made a shadow above the place of the tombs, she sat down on a block of palombino, stunned and dumb.

At sight of him she had known the

baseness of the thing that she would do.

She saw herself as guilty, as cruel, as vile as he who betrayed with a kiss, whose memory has come down through all the ages as the traitor of all traitors.





CHAPTER XLVII.

SHE sat in the hot air and felt neither heat nor fatigue, though she had walked nigh twenty miles since daybreak. An adder crawled by her under the dry grass, and she saw it not. She was struggling with herself, with all her ignorance, her strong instincts, her absorbing passions, her unutterable love for this the only living thing she cared for out of all the universe.

Had he been left to her, all the nations of the earth might have perished in droves like oxen that die of pest and drought, and she would have looked on indifferent.

She sat here, in the silence and the sultriness of the day, like a statue of bronze set upon the dry and cracking ground.

She was quite motionless ; the folded linen on her head kept off her face the vertical rays of the sun, but they fell unfelt on all her crouched form, on her closed hands that were resting on her drawn-up knees, and on her tired feet, past which the adder slid unseen.

She had no knowledge, no experience, but she had imagination.

Imagination showed her the world that waited for him outside that girdle of the moors that held her fast. The vision was in no way like the real world, but it was lovelier, richer, fuller ; such a world as haunts poets in the dreams of a summer's night, crowded with shapes divine and clothed in light.

Here he was hers, but there——

She had no hope, no illusions.

She never thought once that he would say to her, 'come also ;' she never doubted that he would take his freedom as the storm-swallow had done, spreading its wings without once looking back.

Whether she stayed there moments or hours she knew not ; the great heat falling upon her seemed to numb her as if it were a rain of ice. Her eyes grew strained and

bloodshot, her veins swelled and grew dark, her mouth was parched as with great thirst. Still she never moved, she was unconscious of physical suffering, she was saying always to herself—‘He will go! he will go!’

The most terrible, the most cruel temptation that any human soul could ever know assailed her.

Almost she felt as if the priestly fables were true; as if the Power of Evil in bodily shape stood over her in the burning heat, with vast black wings outstretched above her head.

‘Oh, dear God, help me!’ she cried aloud in utter agony.

All that was violent, imperious, and sinful in her sided with the mighty passion she bore her lover, and urged her to bury for ever this secret, which would put an end to all her joy, and give him to the world. All that was noble, tender, and full of the impulse of self-sacrifice in her heart told her that to be false to him, to deceive him, to destroy his life that it might slowly consume itself away within her arms, would be as base as though she killed him sleeping.

The darkness and the light strove for the mastery over her.

She was like one torn in pieces by ravenous beasts that rent her asunder.

The sun was going towards the west, but was still high in the heavens, whose cloudless space looked grey beside the deep and sparkling azure of the sea, when to her ear there came a low faint sound; it was the voice that she loved calling to her, timidly and with caution, from below the nightshade and the acanthus foliage.

He wondered, and was afraid, at her long absence.

The sound pierced her apathy, and roused her, as a child's cry does its mother after birth.

She rose to her feet.

Her bright clear skin was pallid and dull; her throat was dry; her brain was hot, and beating in her skull.

She looked once over the yellowed moors and up to the cloudless skies, as a beast that is hunted to the death will do, seeking for pity, finding none.

She drew her belt close about her loins, as though she went to combat, then plunged without pause into the twilight of the tombs.

Ere he could speak, she cried to him,

hoarsely, with her parching tongue, out of her swollen throat :

‘They have set you free! Go yonder, read it.’

He looked at her, and trembled violently.

He stood just within the entrance of the sepulchre; and as she spoke, such a change came over all his face as comes to a dead man galvanised into sudden life. His lips, his eyes, his whole frame seemed suddenly to grow instinct with life and light and wonder, and rapture and radiance. He caught hold of her with both hands.

‘What? what?’ he said, with tremulous force. ‘What do you say to me? Tell me again—quick, quick!’

It seemed to her as if all his life would go out of him in that passion of hope; as if he would dissolve into the air and vanish, as the Etruscan king had done.

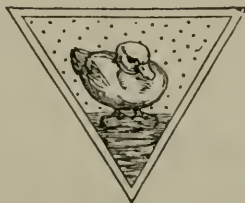
He vibrated from head to foot with passionate desire.

She could not bear to look at him or feel his hand upon her.

‘It is true,’ she muttered hoarsely, as she shook herself loose. ‘Go and see it

for yourself. The old man has confessed
They look for you; you are free.'

Then she glided out of his hold entirely
and went away into the darkness of
inner chambers.





CHAPTER XLVIII.

HE stood mute and motionless awhile. Then, as the truth was borne in on him, tears gushed from his eyes like rain, and he laughed long and laughed loud, as madmen do.

He never doubted her.

He sprang up the stone steps, and leapt into the open air: into that light of day which he had been forbidden to see so long.

To stand erect there, to look over the plains, to breathe, and move, and gaze, and stretch his arms out to the infinite spaces of the sea and sky—this alone was so intense a joy that he felt mad with it.

Never again to hide with the snake and the fox; never again to tremble as his

shadow went beside him on the sand ; never to waste the sunlit hours hidden in the bowels of the earth ; never to be afraid of every leaf that stirred, of every bird that flew, of every moonbeam that fell across his path !—he laughed and sobbed with the ecstasy of his release.

‘ O God, Thou hast not forgotten ! ’ he cried in that rapture of freedom.

All the old childish faiths that had been taught to him by dim old altars in stately Mantuan churches came back to his memory and heart.

On the barren rock of Gorgona he had cursed and blasphemed the Creator and creation of a world that was hell ; he had been without hope ; he had derided all the faiths of his youth as illusions woven by devils to make the disappointment of man the more bitter.

But now, in the sweetness of his liberty, all the old happy beliefs rushed back to him ; he saw deity in the smile of the seas, in the light upon the plains.

He was free !

He laughed again, as children do in utter gladness, the great tears coursing down his cheeks.

Man had remembered him, and God released him!

He was so happy.

Only through his heart one sharp pang shot, as though a dagger pierced it.

They could give him back his freedom and his youth, but never more could life return to that dead woman slain, in the season of her youth, by the waters of Mantua.





CHAPTER XLIX.

AFTER awhile, when some calm had in a measure succeeded to that intoxication of wonder and of thanksgiving, he went within and called to her.

Her voice answered him from the innermost chamber, where was the coffin of Joconda.

‘I am tired,’ she said gently; ‘let me rest.’

‘But tell me, tell me once more,’ he urged with nervous eagerness; ‘this is true? Beyond doubt? What is it you have seen?’

‘What I said. It is printed on the walls. Take the boat and go. You will see and hear what I have said.’

‘You are sure it is no snare?’

‘I am quite sure. Let me rest a little.’

Her voice was weak and broken.

He had no ear to notice that.

He thought only that she was sure—sure—sure. Then it was no dream. He was indeed free.

She was then standing within a foot of him in the grey gloom of the tomb that had been his home so long; but she was no more living for him. What were alive were the throngs of men in the cities, were the laughter of women and their dances, were the ways of the world and its gladness, and its dreams, and its passions, and its strife: all that he had been a stranger to so long; all that the youth in him sighed for, imprisoned here in the night of the grave.

He was not more ungrateful than the storm bird had been; only in him, as in that, there moved the irresistible instincts of movement, the longing to spread wings to the air and go. And in that tumult of emotion and aspiration, and remembrance and desire, she who gave him his liberty was forgotten, as she had been forgotten by the bird. It was natural, and she understood it. She had not looked for any other thing. Only she said once more, ‘I am tired.’

She was tired, no doubt, going all those roads over the hot earth beside the mule to get him bread; but he did not think of it. The whole world had changed for him; life smiled at him once more.

Oh the joy, only to sit unmolested in the public square, and see the careless crowd go by, and feel the sun and wind upon his cheek!

That she was tired he had no leisure to remember. All the memories of his past were thronging about him like brothers and sisters giving welcome from long absence.

His heart was in that silent town amongst the shadowy waters, where he had drifted on his oars under the swell of the deep brazen bells of Ave Maria, and where he had seen the glisten of the lilies in the moonbeams when Death had slept with his mistress.

She was tired, no doubt; but all at once she fell back to nothing in his life; she vanished from it as a plucked rose that drops to pieces goes silently away out of a careless hand.

‘My dear! come forth and speak to me,’ he said, with a sound of joy in his voice

such as she had never heard in it even when he had first said 'you love me!'

'Wait a little,' she answered him; and in a few moments she came out to him, thankful that the light of the tombs was so feeble.

He caught her hands.

'Oh tell me, tell me again, it is true indeed? Tell me all they say.'

She answered him in a strange measured voice, as though she recited a lesson.

'They offer five thousand lire to whosoever can tell where you are. Perhaps your people put it there. It said that the old man has confessed himself guilty of his wife's murder, and that the State pardons you because you are innocent; that I do not understand——'

'It is the common formula when the law has been at fault and condemned the wrong person,' he said quickly, a joyous agitation still trembling in him. 'Yes, yes, no doubt my poor mother offers the reward. What she has suffered! You are sure you read it all?'

'Quite sure.'

He did not observe her, or he would have seen that the calm she had by

such effort attained was strained almost to bursting.

She stood a little away from him; her head was bent, her hands were clasped one in another.

Once, she thought, perhaps now that he was free to go where he listed he would remember the promise she had given Joconda, the promise she had broken for him, and would say—‘shall we go up to the house of God together?’

A vague expectancy, too faint and too unformed to be a hope, came to her for a moment. But the great humility and resignation of her love for him made her doubt whether he would even remember her, once having back his liberty and the world, and not one syllable escaped her lips to recall either his duty or his debt to him.

‘I think I am mad,’ he said, with a gay, unsteady laugh. ‘I feel as if I had drunk new wine; the place goes round with me! Ah, to be free, to be free——’

‘*She* will not rise again to welcome you,’ she said in a low and bitter voice.

For the first time she felt a throb of pity for the woman whose memory she had abhorred; they were alike forgotten.

‘Hush! you are cruel,’ he said angrily. ‘Do you think I did not remember? I would give my liberty up now—now—to make her living once more!’

There was the vibration of true passion in the words; the woman dead in Mantua was dearer to him still than she who had given him a love surpassing human love in its sacrifice and its effort.

She was silent.

He stood silent also; unconscious that he was cruel, as men mostly are.

They rarely wound because they wish to wound, but because they do not remember, do not understand, do not measure the pain with which women love them.

‘Might I go and read that, think you?’ he said suddenly. ‘It may be best to lose no moment of time in showing them I live—some impostor may cozen them—if you will not feel me unkind. Oh, heavens! if you knew—if you only knew—how I long to walk out amongst men in the bright broad day once more!’

‘Go; go at once,’ she said to him, still with that strange faintness and constraint in her voice, which he did not notice.

‘The boat is there; you can find the shore without me; I—am—tired.’

‘I will go, then, and I will return by nightfall, by midnight at the latest. Ah, dear, forgive me if I speak like a drunken man—I feel drunk—drunk with joy! Sweet one, kiss me and farewell; farewell for a few hours! Dear, you have been to me what no living man could merit in any living woman! Often have I felt ashamed——’

‘Hush!’ said Musa, and she strove to smile. It might be that never more would she behold him; she would not let him hear one accent of reproach as her farewell.

He took her tenderly in his arms and kissed her tenderly; feeling indeed that all the life he had to live on earth could never be long enough to repay her all that she had given to him, all that she had done for him here in these twilit chambers of the Etruscan dead. He kissed her again and yet again; then went.

He ascended again into the light and air, and walked a few steps across the ground.

It was so strange, so beautiful, so delicious, this mere sense of utter liberty:

to stand and move erect in the sunshine of the declining day without danger, without terror, without being forced to scan the furthest distance lest any living soul should be in sight. Almost insensibly he moved onward and onward, and it seemed to him as if the dry turf were velvet and the hot air a caress from heaven.

Across the moor he saw the azure glisten of the sea; the boat was there.

Insensibly he walked onwards, his feet elastic as the deer's that goes to drink at the forest spring at daybreak.

The sun was now near its setting.

Maremma saw that western pomp and splendour in its uttermost perfection, its low shores shelving to the sea that rolls away to Spain and Africa. All colours of all jewels known to men glowed there, where the great beams shot upward, like archangels' spears. A storm afar off, beyond the headlands of Sardinia, gave majesty and magnificence to the hour. Low down, southward, dark purples and crimsons strove together, and a beam of lightning ever and again flashed zig-zag athwart them. But these were distant, and did not disturb the golden serenity, the rose-like radiance, of the

immediate west, where the sun hung still high above the waters, one white sail and one brown crossing each other full in the effulgence of its rays.

He had not beheld the sun since, tortured with heat and thirst, he had drifted face upwards, hopeless, and seeing no escape from the galleys save in such death as he would find sinking to those depths below him, where the shark and the octopus waited for drowned men. It allured him with sweet unconquerable attraction. He went softly, almost insensibly, on and on, over the sand and the grass ; his head held high, his eyes happy, his breath coming quickly and gladly, like the sighs of love that is content.

The sea was there ; the world was beyond ; men would welcome him back in their midst.

A vague sense of shame, of duty, of ingratitude, drew him backward like an unwelcome hand ; but it had not strength to detain him.

‘ I will come to her ; I will send for her,’ he said to himself ; and he continued to walk on and on, through the luminous warm air, towards the shining of the blue waters through the red-brown stems of the pines.

He was so happy ; he could not stay to look behind. He longed for the voices of the world, for the hum and the laughter of the streets, for the sound and the sense of living, for the dark old houses leaning above the silvery shallows of Mantuan waters, while the lute throbbed below and the human heart beat above !

Away there, north and south, and east and west, the earth was alive with the mirth and the music and the triumphs and the passions of men.

He forgot that there were pain and privation and struggle and sorrow there also ; he only remembered the world as an orchard of fruit and of flowers, fair to behold and to taste, full of sunshine eternal, and musical with tireless song. That winter came there, and sickness, and grief, and death, he had forgotten.

The boat was on the edge of the sea, tied by a rope to a pine-tree, and with the oars of it lying on the beach.

‘I will come back to her,’ he thought, and he pushed the little skiff through the loose yellow sand to the surf.

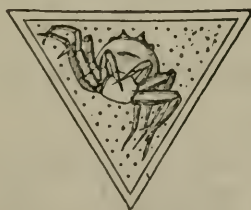
For a moment it ploughed the soil, sullenly grating on the pebbles as it went ; in

another moment it floated buoyant and borne up by the water.

He sprang over its side, and plunged the blades of the oars in the sea.

The breeze that comes a thousand miles in a breath blew a scent of orange-flowers from the woods high above in the north.

His nostrils drew in with delight the sweet familiar scent ; his lips laughed ; his heart rose ; he set the head of his boat northward, and rowed straight for where the orange-trees grew, and ran down to the sea and kissed it.





CHAPTER L.



WEEK went by and he did not return. To her it seemed as if the whole peopled world was dead.

A great despair fell on her, numbing, deadening, destroying all her life as paralysis falls upon the body and enchains it. No tears came to her eyes; no sound came to her lips. She was like a creature suddenly struck dumb.

She crouched in a corner of the inner chamber by Joconda's coffin, and stayed there as a frightened animal whose spirit is all gone out in terror, crouches in a corner, refusing in the stupidity of its fear even to take what would keep life in it.

A week went by, and she crept up into

the air, and sat half the hot hours through under the tall tree-heaths in the sand ; looking, looking, looking across those sun-burnt levels over which he had passed away to the unknown world. For all that seemed left to her of him, it might have been but a dream that ever she had found him there, seated beside the embers of her fire on that August eve.

She was not surprised that he had gone. She had never thought that he would stay, once knowing.

He had gone ; she did not reproach him ; she did not even wonder. She would have wondered if he had stayed.

She had known very well that when she had told him he was free she had drawn the knife across the throat of her living joy and killed it for ever.

She did not reason on it, or protest against her doom ; it seemed to her inevitable, as that when the sun rose darkness fled. The instinctive fatalism, the strange passivity, that are in the southern temper, and succeed its gusts of passion, its heat of rage or love, made her accept her abandonment as a thing not to be questioned ; to be borne as any visitation of nature is borne by the

earth, though it trembles and changes as the earthquake destroys or the flood effaces it.

Thought seemed dead in her, dead with all other forms of life.

He was gone, he was hers no more ; this was all that she knew.

To her as to him who mourned for Daphnis in the Sicilian vales, it seemed as though the very flowers of earth must lament his loss, and the very stone of the rock sigh because it no more could echo to his voice. To her all creation seemed stricken, deserted, mute.

Her happiness was dead, and all living things seemed to her to die with it.

The terrible days, the yet more terrible nights, dragged on ; the vacant hours with no pulse of gladness beating in them passed away in slow procession. No more did she rise and greet the sun with smiling eyes ; no more did the twilight seem a messenger of heaven ; no more was every breath a sigh of deep content.

No more : no more.

The silence that follows on separation has a likeness so frightful to the eternal separation of death that it brings with it the same unspeakable terror, the same sense of

endless, unutterable loss. It is separation, not sleep, that is death's image.

Her soul was dark and empty, like the spent lamp and the dry cup that he had need of no longer.

The light of the world burned now for him, and he could drink from the springs of the world's pleasure-places. He did not want these sad and humble things of hers. She rebelled no more than the earthen vessel and the bronze lamp rebelled because they lay untouched.





CHAPTER LI.

ON the seventh morning there came across the moors the shadows of a man and of a mule. Standing, looking with tearless, aching eyes along those sunburnt levels over which he had gone, her heart gave a leap of rapture and her face grew warm with blood as she saw a human figure through the haze of heat. He had come back!

Soon that joy, too exquisite to live longer than a breath, was broken roughly. It was a stranger who stood beside the laden mule, his face and figure were unknown to her. She dropped back into her attitude of crouching hopeless apathy. What was any pedlar or other traveller across the plains to her?

The mule came on and was led beside the trunk of the cork tree, and the man who led it called aloud to her, 'Is it you who live beneath the ground here? If it be you indeed, I have a letter——'

At that word she leapt to her feet, changed in an instant, as the dry wood is changed when the rosy flame catches it.

'Is he well?' she cried. 'The letter! the letter! Give me, quick.'

'The Count d'Este, my master, is well and in Mantua,' the man answered. 'He sent me here with these; he bade me get a mule at a town on the shore; he bade me see you myself and take him all tidings——'

'The letter! the letter!' she cried, with her hands outstretched.

He gave it to her.

'Oh, dear God! what a blessed thing it is that I can read!' she thought as she seized it; herself transformed, her cheeks the colour of the wild rose that was burning on a hundred hills and vales, all her whole face instinct with life and rapture and gratitude and wonder; wonder that he had remembered, he who never in any moment of her life was absent from her memory.

'Wait without,' she said to him, and

hurried down the stone steps of the tombs.

She could not bear that a stranger's eyes should see her happiness.

It was hard for her to read written words, she had seen so few.

But love aided her; she read it trembling in every limb.

It was not long.

It gave her tender names and words; it begged forgiveness that he had been unable to return; he had been compelled to leave at once for Mantua; there he had learned that no good thing comes alone, that not only had the law freed him, but that he had inherited the vast property and the palace in Rome of a distant relative on his mother's side from whom he had never expected aught. This heritage took him to Rome at once, where henceforth he would spend much time; soon he would come to her or send for her.

‘What can I say to you? I owe you so great a debt; it weighs me down,’ he wrote in conclusion. ‘Think me not heartless that I fled. Nay, dear, it is only that liberty is so rapturous a joy, it makes one mad, when for so long one has been thirsty for it. I send

you a few things that women care for ; mere nothings, indeed, but they will remind you of me. Soon I will come to you or send for you. I took your boat with me and lost it, but you will need it no more, for you must leave that wretched life you lead at once. Go where you will and tell my messenger where I shall find you. Love me always.'

And as he had written those words he had thought :

'Will she be for ever on my life? I owe her so much, but—but—what shall I do with her in the world? She is but a beautiful barbarian, and she will never understand, and she will be for ever like a chain about my feet. And all I want is to forget—to forget!'

She read the letter once—twice—thrice. Inside it was a roll of bank-notes bearing the cipher of a large sum.

If he had killed her she would have kissed his hand as it took her life ; and it would have hurt her less.

There was on the slab of nenfro near her paper and a pencil which she had bought for him long before that he might make drawings for the clay he moulded.

She could write very ill, in the large,

straggling, ill-shaped letters which were all she had been taught.

She wrote thus, with much labour, on a sheet of the paper,—‘I am well. I want nothing. I am yours always; there is no need to say it. I send you back all the things you send because I wish not for gifts and have no need of money. I shall be always here. Think not of me save when you desire.’

Then she signed it *tua eterna devota*, and put it up in a packet with the bank-notes. His letter she thrust into her bosom.

She went up into the light; the messenger, who was an old servant of the house in Mantua, thought, as he saw the change in her face, ‘Was the letter cruel? why did he not come himself?’

He had undone his burden, which was one of the great Italian nuptial caskets, velvet-studded and metal-bound. He had spread out upon the grass some of its contents. They were things of great delicacy and value; strings of pearls, fine raiment, eastern stuffs, jewels. At them she scarcely glanced.

‘Put them all up,’ she said to the messenger, ‘and take them back to him and give

him this letter. I do not want anything ; if he ask you, say I am quite well.'

The servant went back faithfully to Mantua, and faithfully delivered the great casket, and the poor, ill-written, humble, yet proud words.

Este was deeply angered.

The words failed to touch his heart because they stung his conscience.

'Will she ask all my life?' he thought.

But she asked nothing. And the heroism of her silence, as of her sacrifice, awed him, oppressed him, humiliated him.





CHAPTER LII.

THE autumn came and passed, and soon the green moist winter returned to Maremma.

The rose-winged flamingoes and the snow-white birds of the north flew over the sea : her lover returned not with them.

But the knowledge of a great consolation was come to her, and she bore the anguish of her lonely, empty, cruel hours with endurance, since when the March hyacinths and asphodels should open to the light she would hold a human blossom to her breast.

She laboured hard in this winter-time,

knowing that the season would soon come when she could work no more.

Some instinct led her to make friends with a woman at this time, the only woman she had ever been near since Joconda died ; a hard-featured, sunburnt, toil-bent creature prematurely old from a hard toil, who every year came down with her husband and children, and flocks of sheep and goats, all the way by the roads on foot, from the chestnut woods above San Marcello to the green pastures of Maremma. There are many do the same ; it is a laborious life, always beaten about by wind and weather, but the hill-shepherds and herdsmen and their families are used to it, and cling to it as gipsies do. In summer they are up in their own northern hills from hazel-time until the chestnuts drop, and that return consoles them and sustains them.

This woman she saw once, washing linen by beating it with stones in a little stream ; Musa gave her some bread she carried and spoke to her ; the shepherd and the ewes and rams were further off upon the moors. The woman was not curious or intrusive ; the hard life she had led had blown and scorched and chilled and

drenched her with rains till she was scarcely higher as an animal than her own mother-sheep, who wanted nothing but to nibble and browse and hear their lambs bleat and lie safe at night.

She was stupid as a stone ; but she was not unkind nor unfaithful. She kept the secret of the tombs even from her own man, and took a dull liking to this beautiful woodland solitary so unlike herself, who gave her food and helped her to beat her rags in the water, and who looked to her so grand, so fearless, so young, so fair, and yet had the burden of women on her, and was all alone.

‘Never saw I anything like her on these pastures or above on our own hills,’ she thought often, and had a dim superstitious fear of her, and obeyed her without hesitation, and deemed herself paid abundantly by a basket full of fungi or of arbutus-fruit for her children, who were growing up as the lambs and the kids do, tumbling with them on the pastures.

Hers had been but a sorry life ; all winter passed on the lonely moist meadows of Maremma, all summer spent in hard work upon the corn lands on the mountain sides

and the olive and the chestnut forests up above, where the snow lay on the highest rocks in June. It had made her dull, indifferent, always tired; but being an open-air creature she was faithful.

She stayed beside Musa in the beaming days of earliest spring, when the daffodils' trumpets of gold were blowing in all the grass, and the poet's narcissus was shining in every shady place, and the eyes that loved them could not rejoice in them, but were closed on the blindness and languor of pain.

The child of Este was born with the daffodils; but he only breathed a few short days after his birth, and died, softly and painlessly, as the daffodils did when they had bloomed their little hour.

The woman of the Apennines was frightened, because for many hours she could not take his small dead body from Musa's hold; when at last his mother could be made to understand that dead indeed he was, despair seized on her, long convulsions succeeded to her passionate weeping.

If he had lived—if his little feet had run over the grasses to her, if she had heard his first laugh at the first flower; if she had seen Este's eyes smile again in his, and heard

the voice of Este in his broken babyish murmurs ; if she had taught him to look with tenderness at the little wren in her hole and the brown coot on her waterside nest ; if she had carried him on her shoulder to her morning work upon the moors, and borne him homeward with her as the evening bells rang from the far hills and shores—if he had lived, she would have loved her lover in him.

For him she would have worked day and night as she had done for Este ; she would have kept him fresh as the rose, fair to see as the white birds from the north ; she would have carried him in her strong young arms, she would have taught him love as the nightingale teaches its song to its offspring ; she would have prayed for him, tended him, cherished him, made him lovely in all ways, and then perhaps one day she would have taken courage and led him by the hand up to his father's side, and said through him—
' Love, who has ever loved as I ? '

But he was dead ; dead as the faded narcissus shrunk away beneath the leaves.

All that could never be : never, never.

He was dead like the child Itys, for whom his mother mourns through all the ages with every summer eve.



CHAPTER LIII.

THE shepherd's wife went back to the mountains with her flock as the days of the spring lengthened into midsummer, and the warm winds came from the south and blew amongst the ruddy wheat and the browned hay-grasses.

Musa was once again utterly alone ; alone with a grave the more ; a little grave, small almost as if a bird were buried there, that she had made herself with laborious effort in the rocky floor and lined with rosemary as the sedge-thrush lines its nest.

This was all that was left to her of her love.

But her lover lived still, though her eyes could not behold him and his heart called

no more to hers ; he lived in that great unknown world which had stolen and absorbed him ; and therefore the courage of her life came back to her after a time.

Some day he might remember.

Some day he might have need of her.

So she lived on, and the warmth of the year grew into full summer, and the field flowers perished, as her little child had done, under the unbearable light of the sun.

A strange silence seemed to her to have fallen on all the world, although around her in truth the solitary moors were still musical with many a nightingale, and many a cushat cried its happy call from pine to pine, and across the far edge of the great plains there went many a band of reapers, come down from the mountains to lay the tall wheat low, many of them going by singing, with lutes strumming in front of them, and dogs about their feet, and wild magnolia flowers from old forsaken gardens slung with the wine gourds and swinging at their waists.

But they were too far off to be more than distant dark lines against the sky, and could their songs have reached her she would have been deaf to them, as she

was to the nightingales thrilling through the night in those last melodies that would cease as the fire-flies would die with the fall of the wheat.

Yet in this intense stillness and desolation in which she dwelt it never came into her thoughts to seek out Este, never at any time. She could not go to him, without seeming to say, 'Have you forgotten—you my debtor in so much?'

She could not go to him without bringing both a rebuke and a reproach before her. If he forgot—he must forget. All she could do was to live on and wait; some time he might remember.

This seemed to her neither heroism nor sacrifice, but simple necessity.

If he had passed by her in a crowd she would have kissed the stones his steps had touched, but she would not have spoken, since to speak would have been to say to him, 'You are thankless.'

Her love was her religion.

Fools may say what they will; there is none holier.

She lived on without joy, but not wholly without hope. The long, slow-footed days seemed very long; the cloudy heat, the rain-

less wind, seemed wearisome and sad. She laboured enough, just enough, to meet her barest wants ; no more.

She no more watched the stars, the plants, the birds, the streams and shallows with the blue butterflies at play upon their surface.

Her youth seemed to have died in her with the little child, her eyes seemed for ever to be darkened with tears that never fell.

As each hour went by she thought, ‘Where is he? who beholds him? who watches for his step?’

When night fell, she prayed that in his dreams he might once dream of her, and so remember once.

Did he fear her reproaches that he did not come? Ah ! how little he knew !——





CHAPTER LIV.

AS she sat at the entrance of the tombs on the day of the vigil of St. John, watching—always watching—for the shadow she never saw, the step she never heard, there crept slowly over the pathless turf two large white bullocks yoked together.

There also was a group of men, seven in all, who led the oxen; and the ox-waggon bore loads of masons' implements and cordage, and empty sacks and baskets.

She did not notice them, except dully to wonder what they came to do there, and to be thankful that they had not come a year earlier, when he had hidden in the earth under their feet.

They crept on straight over the moor, and towards the hidden burial-place.

The foremost of them, who was a sullen-looking, aged man, advanced from the rest a little, and approached her.

‘It is you who live below there?’ he cried roughly.

She was mute.

The old man was the steward of that absent Neapolitan prince who owned the house at Santa Tarsilla which had been occupied by Joconda for so many years; the steward who at her sudden death had made pretence of a year’s rent being due, and under that pretext sold her chattels.

To him there had gone a man of San Lionardo, leading with him his little son, and the two together had told him how on those moors which had been for a thousand years a portion of the fief of the Altamonte princes there had been found *buche delle fate* by a girl, who had stolen the treasure possibly, and made of the tombs her home. The little boy, who was no other than Zefferino, deposed gravely to having seen mountains of gold and jewels under the earth. In this country vengeance may doze and wait, but does not die.

The imagination and avarice of the steward were inflamed to fever heat.

There had of late been discoveries of tombs near Cære to the south, in which had been found vases of great worth, and quantities of armour, shields, crowns, toys, and ornaments of gold, all of which had been sold for large prices to foreign States for their museums. The steward readily believed the little lad's tale, which was confirmed by a *buttero* of his own, who said that when he had ridden near the blasted suber-oak one twilight time he had seen a maiden with a bronze *amphora* on her head going down for water at a spring that rose near there.

Musa knew him at a glance, and he knew her.

He came to her and spoke roughly.

‘ You wicked wench, you stole Joconda's mule away from me, I have not forgotten that. Ever since then I meant to track you when I had time, and at last I come upon you. You are an evil one ! ’

‘ It is you who are evil,’ she said coldly. ‘ Joconda had paid her rent beforehand, on the first day of August, and you accused her falsely, and sold her goods out of despite, under pretext of a debt. You are a bad man. It is a pity that the prince your master does not know how bad you are.’

‘Oh, ho, vermin!’ cried the steward, frantic with rage. ‘That is the tongue you dare to use to me, is it? Spawn of the devil you always were, and the pity is that the days are gone by when one could have had you burned as the devil’s daughter. Pray you, now, do you know whose ground this is?’

She gave a gesture of negation, of indifference, of ignorance. She had never thought of the ground as any one’s property; it belonged to God and his dead. The moor was free to all, so she thought. These great green silent lands seemed too vast, too mute, too solemn, to be parcelled out amidst the legal claims of men. Who claimed the sea? Who would, went on it, gleaned from it, was fed by it, lulled by it, devoured by it when it was in haste and rage. As the sea was free to all, so she had always believed was the plain.

‘Well, this land is the prince’s, my master’s,’ said the man with great unction and vicious wrath united. ‘If we had known that you had harboured here, out you would have gone, long, long ago. And, indeed, it would go hard with you now did my master choose to have the law on you, for who knows what treasures you may not

have made away with ; but he is merciful, and so am I, and therefore we do not mean to hurt you : only out you go.'

She heard but dully. Only a few months earlier, and she would have fought for her refuge and her rights to it as a tigress may fight for her den ; but now the spring of her life was broken, her courage was not gone, but was deadened ; her whole spirit was sunk in hopeless apathy. Yet a great terror fell upon her. Without this home she would be desolate as the house-martin, who sees the wall that held his nest crumble into dust. For so long she had lived there, for so long each moment of the day had been given to some thought that centred in these familiar tombs. 'They had been hers, so entirely hers, borrowed in all humility and gratitude direct from the dead who were with God. Without them she would be not only homeless, but exiled from all she knew, from all she loved. No palace, had they given her one, would have been as dear to her as these hallowed chambers, shared with the lizard and the bat.

'There was gold in these tombs,' he said to her.

She answered him coldly :

‘Yes, there was when I saw them first.’

‘And you have stolen it?’

‘I never steal; I leave that to you to do at your lord’s expense. The gold was stolen by a galley-slave, one you have heard of, Saturnino Mastarna. It can do him no harm to say so, for he has escaped.’

He believed nothing that she said. He was certain that the gold was either in the tombs or safe hidden underneath the soil.

‘If you will tell me honestly where the treasure is I will not give you up to justice,’ he said, thinking so to possess a secret which without her might escape him for ever.

‘I cannot tell you what I do not know,’ she answered him. ‘Ask Saturnino Mastarna, if you can find him.’

‘You are a cursed jade,’ cried the old man, with the *rabbia* seizing him, and called her many worse names still. Musa turned her back on him, and stood awaiting his next act. She would not show him what she felt, but her heart was beating to suffocation with fear lest she should be hunted from her home.

‘The tombs are my lord’s. They are of value, they are full of treasure, they are my master’s,’ he kept repeating now.

Go you down into them, and get your chattels—that I will let you do, but nothing more—and waste no time about it for we are about to clear the entrance and take all the old work there may be there back with us. These are the orders we have had. But I see very well that you have robbed us of all that there was good in it. You look aghast, and you are dumb.’

She was so ; she was like the poor hare on the moor who could not understand why she was grudged her form of grass, that caused no loss to any living thing, yet was the whole world to her.

‘I have stolen nothing,’ she said once more. ‘I found these sepulchres. They are not your lord’s nor mine, but belong to the dead. I have done no hurt there. It is all I have of home.’

‘She is but an impudent jade living thus, in the bowels of the soil, and with a paramour I make no doubt,’ said the angry steward. ‘Men, get you to work to clear these shrubs away and find the door ; we can waste no more time. If there be sculptures we are to hew them off, and that is a long business. Get to work and look for this vixen’s earth’

In an earlier time she would have plunged a knife into the first hand that had touched those sepulchres, but now she was mute and motionless. The greater loss that she had endured made this loss almost light to her. Only she knew not where to lay her head if she was driven out, and every stone was dear to her—‘dear as remembered kisses after death.’

When the first blow of the hatchets fell on the shrubs around, the sound roused her; she leaped into their midst with her old force and fire.

‘You shall not touch them!’ she cried passionately, as she wrenched the first axe away. ‘They are not yours, nor mine, nor any one’s. You shall not touch them. They belong to God.’

The men laughed. They were, together, stronger than she was. They seized her and tied her wrists with a cord, and then bound her ankles with one, and cast her aside upon the soft sand under the heath as they would have cast a troublesome dog or goat.

They were not cruel, but they thought her a strange wild creature, and they were desirous to get their work over, and lie in the

shade, and drink their wine, and sleep the noontide sleep they loved.

Their steward eyed her with a more evil glance. He had long sucked all the best juices out of his lord's properties himself; he was bitterly chagrined that he had missed such treasure-trove as Etruscan tombs unopened yield; he made no doubt that she had stolen all the gold.

He had ridden over this moor in spring twelve months before. Why, he thought, had not his horse's hoofs broken through the crumbling sandstone, the thick soft moss, and shown him this kingdom of the dead? He was angry at his own negligence, and hated her since she, he never doubted, had rifled all the place and now they would find nothing; so he grumbled to his peasants, who were still at work with spade and hatchet, being still ignorant of where the entrance was.

She, bound as they had bound her, lay upon the sward and watched them, mute.

'If you will spare our labour and tell me where the entrance is we will set you free,' they said to her; but she did not unclose her lips.

The calm under torment that the

southerner shares with the oriental had come upon her. She was dumb as the dead within. Only her great eyes looked on, wide open, and full of anguish.

Soon the labourers lighted on the entrance-place with a shout, and she saw her sanctuary was discovered. She heard the blows of mallet and axe ; she heard the grind of chisel and pickaxe. They were hewing out a wider space by which to enter. Then they lighted on the open portico of the *cellula janitoris*.

Writhing in her bonds, she called to them in anguish : ‘ you must not enter ; you must not, you shall not ; my little child lies there ! ’

She cried the same thing over and over again a hundred times, struggling and twisting madly in her captivity.

The old man heard, and put but one meaning on her words.

‘ She has killed her child and hidden it here ! ’ he thought, and searched the place of burial, and perceived that recently the rock of the floor had been broken up in the first chamber.

There was a bronze Etruscan lamp burning where the stone had been cut through,

and a little handful of honeysuckle was in an earthen *mastos* standing by ; the ‘ mother of the woods ’ is the flower that braves longest of all the summer heats.

‘ Is that her remorse ? ’ thought the bitter-hearted old man, as he bade his men tear up the pieces of broken rock, where soon they found the small body of the little child, wrapped, heedfully, in linen and lying in the buds of rosemary. There was a gold *Madonnina* buried with it. There were no marks of violence upon it, and some property of the air or rock, not uncommon in this soil, had preserved the little corpse from all corruption and made it look like a pale waxen image.

Even the hard hearts and dull souls of the men were moved to some emotion as they looked on it, lying dead upon its bed of withered rosemary.

‘ She never harmed it,’ they murmured to one another ; but their director grew angry and bid them be silent.

‘ You are idiots,’ he said to them. ‘ She killed it, and hid it here. If she had not killed it, would she have denied it honest Christian burial ? ’

Angry and disappointed, and inflamed

with baffled cupidity, he roamed from chamber to chamber, making no count of the paintings of the walls, and of the slender grace of the bronze lamps, being too ignorant to know their value in their arts, and being greedy for the yellow glitter of the metal that he loved.

All the traces of her occupation of the place infuriated him more and more, for he saw in each assurance that she had dwelt there long enough to rifle and to rob. He called out to his men to clear the rubbish away, and was the first to fling with his own hand on the ground the black and red earthen vessels that he despised as valueless.

Lying where they had placed her under the sharp foliage of the marucca she saw the violation of the sepulchres that were sacred to her alike for the living and the dead.

All the black earthenware of the tombs they furiously broke upon the ground until, of it all, there only remained a pile of shattered potsherds ; the metal lamps they threw upon the cart, these would serve to help light their kitchens ; all her own simple things they threw down in a heap, and the old man snapped across his knee the keys of the old tortoiseshell lute.

It seemed to her as if every sound fell on her breast, on her brain.

The men were angry because, entering, they found no metal-work of value, no plat-
ters or vases, or cups, or chains, or bracelets
of the virgin gold of Etruria, such as were
yielded in such rich harvest by the famous
necropolises of Palestrina, of Cervetri, of the
Montarozzi.

They were bitterly irritated, the steward
most so of all; he having been sure to
make a fine gleaning there, a tithe of which
he would have given to his master who
knew nothing of this day's work, though his
name was used so glibly.

It was yet very early.

The old man sat in the shade of the
tomb and drank the clear red wine that she
had bought for Este, and cast his cunning
eyes about in search for some gold or silver
or amber that might be hidden in the sand,
or lost in the dark where the bats clung. He
saw none; all the gold-work that had ever
been there had been taken by Saturnino, and
finding none, despite all his pains and dili-
gence, he grew more and more angry, more
and more suspicious; he had had visions of
such wealth within these graves as that which

was found by the Prince of Canino—wealth of which he could give his owner a discreet portion, whilst with the rest he would swell that ever-growing hoard which was the sweetest sight his twinkling eyes ever dwelt on; he was wont to feast on it by oil light, when his doors were bolted and barred with locks three hundred years old, in his old grey house set down amidst the marshes and the salt lagoons.

Having at length espied in the darkness the *fibula* and the few ornaments which Saturnino had overlooked, and which she had once refused to sell even for Este's sake, the sight of these only inflamed his cupidity the more, and made him the surer that there had been some vast treasure seized and sold by her; and this conviction so tormented and enraged him that with his own hands he would have strangled her had it not been that he was timid where the law stepped in and knew he should be punished for doing such rough justice on her.

His gaze roving thus, sullen and eager to discover, fell at last on the coffin of Joconda, where it rested in the twilight behind the stone bier of that Etruscan knight who once had been sole lord there.

His shrewd sense saw at once that this was a thing of yesterday, that no Etruscan dead were slumbering in that long, rough, shapeless box of unplanned pine-wood, with the black cross rudely painted on it. His cunning little soul, steeped all its days in chicaneries, and usuries, and efforts to outwit his lord and to grind down his people, fell all at once on the darkest and the foulest meaning that this strange sight could bear.

Some murder had been done here, hidden away with the dust and ashes of two thousand years : done by this girl no doubt.

So he believed, and his small soul leapt up in gladness.

It would be hard to punish her for the missing gold-work, for there was no proof there ever had been such in these graves, though morally he was sure of it ; but for these dead bodies hidden away, justice could be easily summoned. He shook a little, for he was a timid man, and to be thus in company with the dead was ghastly to him, and he called aloud to his men to leave off hewing at the stone lion and come look here.

Between them they got the coffin open, and, shuddering and muttering paternosters,

they uncovered the poor, withered, lifeless frame of her that was untouched by corruption as yet, being so shrivelled and fleshless with old age, and further preserved by the dry aromatic air of the painted chamber.

‘It is a woman. It is Joconda Romanelli!’ he said gasping; and his men shrank together awed and frightened, and shut the coffin down and stood staring.

A thrust of the knife in a brawl, a shot on a lonesome hill, and fierce vengeance deftly worked out—these they were well used to in Maremma, and they saw no great harm in them. But this body, torn from Christian burial and sanctified ground, and shoved away with these Etruscan mummies, seemed to them a ghastly horror; for had not the girl taken all the gold?

Meanwhile, outside in the sunshine, Musa lay with bound limbs, strained ears, and aching eyes; powerless to move, not knowing what they did, judging only of their violence by the broken lute and the heap of broken Etruscan ware that were thrown out beside her on the sand.

‘It is God’s mercy he is gone,’ she thought; that was her chief remembrance.

Yet all her life ached in her as if it were snapped asunder like the lute ; she was like the bird who sees rough hands tear down and scatter on the winds the nest that it cost him such anxious care to build, and that he guarded so jealously whilst he sang his love song underneath the leaves. Like the bird she had offended none, making her home as silently and meekly as he did where the wild bay grew and the woodspurge crept with the moss. She had asked nothing of the world more than the bird does ; yet they could not let her be.

She heard the blows of the mallet on the marble cease, and all was still. She wondered dully what they were doing now ; dully, for pain had numbed her, and the worst that could have come to her seemed already done.

The men, within, held council.

Some were jocose and jested broadly : she was a handsome creature, they said ; the old steward was blind to such charms, the chills of age and avarice made him insensible to such a plea ; he was angry that the gold was gone, he only longed to punish her, to see her hurt.

She had sold all the jewellery, of that he

felt sure, or had buried it somewhere on the moors, to get it when she chose.

And this dead woman's body—if it were not the cover of some crime, why should such a corpse be hid here thus?

No; he was resolute; to justice she should go, away to Orbetello. They would take the dead body in its deal box with them, and the corpse of the little child wrapped in its linen, and let the judges see. He persuaded himself and them that he was acting from pure rectitude and horror of crime; in truth he would never have cared though a hundred corpses had rotted there if he had found the gold vases, the gold platters, the gold chains. Aloud he said that those who would desecrate a sepulchre would do any other sin; such were best dealt with and put aside by law. He washed his hands of it.

So he went out into the sunny air, and bade his men lift her, bound as she was, upon the ox-cart.

But, although bound, she revolted so fiercely at their touch that they were frightened and hung back.

‘What have I done?’ she cried to them.

‘Waste no words on her,’ said the

steward. 'She shall answer before the judges.'

'I have done no harm,' she said, as she wrenched her ankles free by violent effort and stood before them, her hands still tied behind her back. 'I knew not that those tombs had any owner. They belong to the dead. I did the dead no harm. They were not afraid of me, nor I of them. Why do you touch me? Why do you bind me? I have done no evil. It is you who insult the grave. It is you who break their laws and rob——'

'Where is the gold that was there?' shrieked the old steward, stung into accusation. 'Where is the gold, you wanton? And where is your lover that you screened there? Who was the father of your child?'

She was silent.

They took her silence for guilt; she seemed to them to be overwhelmed with her own crime thus brought before her. Her great luminous eyes stared at them with a terrible, unutterable sadness that they were frightened at, and took for guilt.

'To justice with her,' said the old man cruelly. 'Heave her in the cart, men; she has the *mal'occhio*.'

She was heaved into the cart by the ropes that tied her limbs; her feet hung over the rail, her head and body were on the hard wood; she was used as they used a young heifer.

They thought her something unnatural and unearthly; they dreaded the evil eye; they had no mercy, and their director hovered round her, tightening a rope with unction, or knotting her hair upon a nail, in vengeance for that gold he had not found. It hurt her more when they touched her bare feet, or their rough movements unloosened the linen off her breast.

All her beauty was Este's, for these to look on it was treachery to him.

To her own fate she was almost callous. He had gone, and she was driven from the place where he had been, and where every stone, every leaf, every grain of sand, seemed to speak to her of him; it was indifferent to her what else befell her. If they broke her on the wheel as they did the saints of old, she would not suffer more than she had done when she had heard his footsteps go away so willingly, so lightly, over the scorched turf.

The oxen moved on; the ponderous

wheels turned, the springless waggon rolled upon its road.

The old man and one other came with her ; the rest of the men stayed to guard the tomb and hew out the sculptures in the rock.

The way they went was not towards Santa Tarsilla, but southward to the marshes which, where the moors sloped to the south, replaced it and made all the earth like a sponge, now white with cotton-grass and billowy water-reeds.

Turning her burning eyes from side to side, she saw the places she had roamed over, hunting for cactus-fruit, and the wild prickly pear, and the blue bilberries of the thickets. She saw the little pools where she had splashed and bathed ; the fringes of cane where reluctant she had searched for the eggs of the fluttering water-hen ; she saw the broad blue sky above her head, a green ibis on its voyage was the only speck upon it ; it flew high above her, straight above her, and winged its wise way eastward, to the lands of sunrise. She envied it.

She lay face upward on the bottom of the waggon, her hands tied so that she could not brush away a gnat or fly. The

sun beat on her, the insects tormented her, mosquitoes fastened on her feet as they hung over the rail.

The men took no notice of her; they jolted on as they would have gone with a bound calf or a shot doe behind them.

As long as she could, she looked for the pine-trees that grew by the sea, for the great branches of the cork tree that spread themselves above the place of the tombs. When she could behold these no longer, tears of blood came into her eyes; the sky and the moor and the air grew crimson to her.

The oxen crept on, pulling against their rings of iron, groaning against their heavy yokes; tired and sore, they licked their lips with parched tongues, they sobbed now and then like beaten children when the goad struck them.

The waggon rolled on, over the burned moorland, to the marshes where the earth was still wet, and the stagnant waters were green as the broad leaves of their lilies. Here all was treeless, level, vapourous; the black buffalo wading content in the ooze, the butor sitting motionless in the swamp; here and there came *gladiolus* flowers, rising

like red plumes ; everywhere there was a sea of reed-grass and rushes murmurous with clouds of insects ; a watery desert where disease walked abroad alike by noonday and by night.

A narrow road, often raised on piles, crossed the morass, and oftentimes a false step of the oxen to right or left would have plunged the waggon into the bog on either side that was hidden under the rank vegetation of grass and rushes. This single road traversed the marshes, and united them with the great fields of grain that lay beyond, square leagues of corn stretching far as the eyes could reach from sea to mountains, and now brown and bending to the sickle.

Before they entered on these great corn lands where harvest was ending mirthfully, despite the pestilence that rode on every sunbeam, the men stayed their tired and beaten oxen, who, footsore and with the water falling from their eyes, would, pressed longer, have dropped down to rise no more.

Then, and then only, they bethought them to look at their burden ; as they would have looked at the heifer to see that

she did not die before the butcher's mallet should strike her.

They found her unconscious, and breathing heavily ; the sun had struck her and made her, for the hour, insensible to all her pain.

‘She is a jade, but we must not kill her, or they will call us to account,’ said the old steward to his man.

So they halted there for her sake as well as for that of the oxen, and laid her down upon the ground, and tried what rough surgery they knew to call back the senses that the sun had slain.

The illness in a few hours passed off her, and she regained the consciousness of her unutterable misery.





CHAPTER LV.

THE old man, not to be diverted from his vengeance and his purpose, rested with her that night at his own farmhouse on the edge of the great corn lands, and in the morning began his journey afresh with other oxen, and took her to the sad sea town of Orbetello, where the people die of the heat like flies of poisoned meat, and the salt crystals on the shore are all its wealth.

The seizure of her was not legal, and he had no legal power to make it; but such trifles as legality could easily be ignored by the steward of a grand prince who was absent, and had half the Orbetellano in his keeping. When he left the inland tracks and entered on the long line of darksome

pine-wood that by land connects Telamone and Orbetello, he for form's sake made the matter known to a brigadier of carabineers who was his friend, and, to have all matters right in form, his friend sent two mounted guards, with their carbines slung beside them and their cutlasses at their side, to go beside the ox-cart into the town, and give the captive up to the prison authorities.

Thence they went on again under the pines by the side of the blue glancing sea, and she lay, almost senseless, on the straw at the bottom of the waggon.

They met old Andreino on the coast. He held up his hands and cried aloud :

‘ Dear Lord ! Did I not always know that she would meet her end like that ! The saints be praised she did not get my sweet Nandino ! ’

At Orbetello they threw her into prison after hearing how she had hidden a dead body in the closed Etruscan tomb.

She did not understand of what they accused her. She thought vaguely that they missed the gold things stolen by Saturnino, and that they attributed the theft to her. But it was not clear to her ; neither could she comprehend why

they should blame her for having buried her little child and brought the body of Joconda there. She had done no harm ; she could not see why they should seek to punish her. But the spirit with which a few months earlier she would have laughed them to scorn and cut her way free of them, if needs be with her knife, was gone out of her. Her lover was lost to her, and her child was dead : little else mattered.

She was kept in that prison a month, awaiting such time as they should see fit to remove and to try her for this crime. The air grew very hot ; the town was like a sick ward in a hospital, the miasma crept up at sunset every night from the swamps around, and found out the people sitting on the sea-walls, or in the streets at dominoes, or lying panting and naked on their beds.

She was shut in her little cell ; she who had all the day long roamed moor and shore, and plunged in the waves, and led the life of a woodland beast or of a silver-plumaged guillemot.

The cell had a square window, with four transverse iron bars ; it was very narrow, but through it she could see the sea, the only familiar friend she had. She thought

in after days that it was this sight of the sea which alone kept her alive in those terrible weeks. She could see a hand's-breadth of its blue jewel-like surface leaping, and seeming to laugh, and every now and then a felucca sail would sweep across the narrow field of her vision, or the wing of a gull would flit by, and these familiar things kept sense in her, and saved her from insanity.

Presently they put with her a prostitute ; a woman abandoned and loathsome, who was there on a charge of having murdered a youth in a brawl. She was a creature of foul and filthy tongue, and she tried her uttermost to hurt what she saw was a pure soul ; but Musa shut her ears and her lips, and looked at the sea ; and the obscenity passed by her without harming her. She was beyond that woman's reach.

This great love which absorbed her was like an ivory wall built up between the world and her.

All the while, day and night, she was thinking—if he should go back ? if he should go back and find the tomb empty, and her place vacant ? Would he think her faithless ? would he think she had tired so soon ?

This doubt was such agony to her that at times it conquered her reason, and she would shake the bars that divided her from sea and sky, and cry aloud to the gulls and ships to take her message to him, to tell him where she was mewed up against her will, torn away from her moors and her beach, and her innocent liberties of wind and sunshine.

The next day but one they led her out to be examined. She regained her self-control, and was quite calm, though very pale.

‘I have done nothing wrong,’ she said to her guards; ‘wherefore should I be afraid?’

They set her before her judge, the Pretore of the court there, a lawyer in black gown and cap. He was startled by her look, by her solemn luminous eyes, the repose of her attitude, the contempt upon her beautiful mouth.

‘She is no criminal,’ he thought, and called for the deposition of the testimony against her

Then the steward, who gave his name and that of his lord, gave his declaration of

all that he had seen and done ; of the dead bodies he had found there, and of the uses to which she had put the Etruscan tomb. He could not accuse her of theft as well, but he said that a shepherd boy, whom he could produce, had known her and seen gold there in an earlier time, whereas he had only found a gold *fibula* and a gold grasshopper or two.

When he had sworn all that, his men were called, and described on oath their entrance and examination of the tombs, and their discovery of the body of the little child and of the woman's coffin. The steward then added his own witness that the body of the woman was beyond doubt that of one Joconda Romanelli, who had been a tenant of his master's at Santa Tarsilla, and had died three years before.

This was the case against her. The young judge, who had felt prepossessed in her favour, looked grave and stern : on the use of the tomb as a dwelling-place he would have been inclined to look leniently ; but for the concealment of the dead bodies he could see no plea : nothing could extenuate such an act, so hostile to every prejudice of a Christian

land, even if no darker bloodguiltiness were involved in it.

The accusation ended, he addressed her, and asked her for her own explanation of her acts.

It was at all times difficult to her to find many words to explain her thoughts, and in this strange place, before these cruel unfamiliar faces, without a friend beside her, her heart was sick, her brain was dizzy, her eyes swam. Nevertheless she strove to be calm and to answer them. She could not bear that the listening crowd should think her afraid or guilty.

‘I buried my little child with me,’ she said simply, while the hot tears swelled up in her eyes and throat, ‘because I wished to have him near me always. How can you think I hurt him? I would have given my life for his, of course. As for Joconda, they thrust her away in a hole in the sand, and I went for her because it seemed thankless to leave her all alone in the rain and the wind; she had been most good to me, and I loved her. I did not think I did any harm; I do not think that I did do any. I have nothing else to say. I found the tombs; I did not know I might not use them; I have

maintained myself honestly in them, I owe no one anything.'

Then she ceased to speak, and stood without indifference, but without anxiety, with a tranquil and haughty simplicity and repose.

The judge was perplexed.

'How long did the child live?' he asked.

'Only seven days.'

'Of what did he die?'

'I cannot tell; he faded as the flowers do when the sun is too hot.'

'Why did you not give him Christian burial?'

Her old scorn flashed in fire from her eyes.

'Christian burial?—to pay a stranger to dig a hole, and mumble something, and then to go away and forget?'

'It is the law of the land.'

'The law is cruel, and foolish, and blind,' she said coldly, thinking of how in Mantua the law had condemned an innocent man, and honoured and praised the murderer.

'The law is sacred and omnipotent, as you will find,' said the judge in rising anger. 'Who was your lover?'

Over the pallor of her face the colour mounted fast, then faded.

‘That I will never tell you.’

‘The law shall compel you to speak.’

‘That the law cannot do,’ she said with a calm disdain. Had not Læna bitten through her tongue rather than speak of him she loved? So also could she. Este had told her the old Greek story.

The judge was angered, irritated, and bewildered. He knew not what to do. He could not think her guilty, yet he could not, in face of the offended majesty of the law he represented, declare her guiltless, and refuse the steward of Prince Altamonte his right to demand a trial.

He closed the examination hurriedly, and remanded her to prison, there to await her fate. There was no one to tell her that perhaps she might successfully ask to be left free until the time of trial, and, indeed, such a request would probably have been refused in view of the guilt of which she was accused.

But that night the judge said to his subpretore, ‘Never did I see innocence if I do not see it thither; and she would go to the scaffold, if we sent her there, mute.’

In the populace, on the contrary, there was furious wrath against her, and readiness to condemn her to the worst chastisement had they had her fate in their hands. She was only the Musoncella, and she had offended all their dearest superstitions. What was she to deride the consecrated ditch in which they all hoped to lie, when it came to their turn, made snug till the Day of Doom, and made safe for that by their priests' mumbled rites?

They said amongst themselves that they would warrant she had the *mal'occhio*, and that this lover whom she would not name had been the foul fiend himself. Had they had their way they would have given her short shrive.

Meanwhile the guards took her back to her prison-cell.

Then she understood what Este had felt ; why she had been powerless to console or to content him so long as the sense of captivity was upon him, so long as he could no more go whither he listed.

Now it was at this time the end of midsummer, and the law courts throughout Maremma would be closed until autumn by reason of the unhealthiness of the hot season,

so that there she would remain until they opened again, and might die of the malaria of the town for aught that any one knew or cared. An accused is always two-thirds of a criminal in the eyes of the law, which always looks through magnifying glasses.

The steward went his way, the judge and the lawyers went theirs. No one cared whether she lived or died, and the hot winds came and blew the *stagno* into pestilential vapours, and the white piles of the salt glared in the sun, and the heavy livid heat settled down on all the shore, and disease walked abroad with every fall of evening dew.

They shut her in her cell, and the sole solace she had was that she was left alone in it. But it went hard with her to keep her reason; not to let go her hold on life and sense. She to whom it had been torture only to see the birds imprisoned in the nets, to whom the open air had been as breath from the very lips of a merciful God, to whom the lowliest weed had had beauty and the lowliest beast been a comrade, who had never missed the setting of the sun and the rising of it, who had watched the passage of the round moon through the illu-

mined clouds with the deep delight that poets know, to whom the forest or the moorland day had been one hymn of praise to nature, and who, amidst her deepest sorrow, had found that consolation in the solitudes of the wolds which nature keeps for those who love it perfectly, to her, a prison cell was every hour such misery as those know who, buried in haste, awake from their swoon to find the oak of the coffin, the stone of the vault, for ever between them and the living world.

The only thing that saved her from madness was that small square space in the wall through whose bars she could see a hand's-breadth of the sky and water, and smell the salt glad scent of the sea.

The only thing that made her cling stubbornly to life was the faint hope, shut in silence in her own breast, that Este might hear, and come.





CHAPTER LVI.

ONE day they told her a friend asked to see her. All the dying courage sprang up in her, and the passion of longing made her face rosy as the day-dawn. It was he !

She leaped on her feet and ran to the grated door, and put out both her hands, and cried, with laughter and with tears, in strange abandonment and delirium for her grave nature :

‘ Oh, my love ! oh, my love ! you have remembered——’

The words died on her lips, the blood seemed to ebb away from her heart and brain, she turned sick and cold.

It was not Este ; it was the Sicilian mariner.

He stood on the threshold of her cell, and the tears were coursing down his cheeks; he was very pale, and he was silent; words came to his throat, but seemed to choke him and were mute.

She shrank back in unspeakable revulsion of feeling; the blood seemed to turn to ice in her veins under the disappointment.

She sat down and turned her face from him.

The action smote him to the quick and unloosed his tongue.

‘Let me help you! Let me help you!’ he said piteously; and could think of nothing more or better to say.

She shook her head in sign of refusal.

Help her! how could he help her? How could Heaven itself help her, since her lover had forgotten, and her child was dead?

‘If I had only known! If I had only known!’ he said stupidly. ‘Oh, the beast—the fool——’

She turned her face towards him, and looked up from under her lowering brows.

‘Go away,’ she said sternly, and in a low steady voice. ‘I do not want you. I did not send for you. I told you I never should for twenty years. Go, go!’

Almost weeping as women do, he came nearer to her.

‘I cannot go!’ he said passionately. ‘Oh, I know you do not care. I know I cannot comfort you, but something I may do. I am better than no one, though I am only a rude foolish seaman. Do not think I will talk of myself, of anything I feel; I only want to speak of you, I only want to defend you against these devils——’

‘If they would let me go back——’

The one great longing that was in her heart escaped her despite herself. If only they would let her go back! She wanted nothing more from the mercy of men.

‘They must let you go back!’ he said vehemently. ‘They must; they shall! What harm have you done, poor innocent?’

‘I have done none,’ she said wearily. ‘But they do not believe that. As if I would have hurt his child!’

The infinite tenderness that was in her voice stung cruelly the man who heard her. But he controlled his own pain; he only said gently:

‘You could hurt nothing. You loved all the little birds and the poor hunted beasts—oh, my dear! oh, my dear!’

His strength failed him, and a low sob quivered in his strong throat.

The horror of it, and the pity of it, conquered his fiery temper and broke down his bold spirit into utter weakness.

She was silent.

His sorrow did not touch her any more than his passion had ever done. She had no place in her thoughts left for him.

‘And where is he?’ muttered the sailor. ‘Where is he, the white-livered coward, the false faithless wretch you loved? Where is he? May the curse——’

She sprang to her feet, and looked at him with the fire of other days in her eyes.

‘Do not dare to speak of him. What is it to you? You are a stranger to me. Get you gone; get you gone.’

‘But he has been false to you!’

‘What is that to you? You are not my brother. You are a strange seaman of whom I know nothing, of whom I wish never to know aught. Go your way, and leave me to mine—whatever it be.’

Then, exhausted by the momentary violence, she sat down once more in the same attitude, leaning her head wearily against the wall of the cell. He could not see her face.

‘I only wish to serve you, if I can,’ he said humbly, and trembling as no danger of the deep seas had ever made him tremble.

‘You cannot,’ she said, with her face still hidden from him. ‘But go, go. It hurts me to speak and being spoken to ; I am best alone.’

He lingered, torn in two by his grief and his love for her. It had been wild love, born of a glance, of a word, of a glimpse of dark eyes on a summer morning that shed its light on a beautiful face that had been fixed on his heart for evermore ; but it was faithful love, ready to do and to dare all things.

He only hesitated here because he knew not what to do.

‘I will go since you wish it,’ he said at last. But I shall be always in Orbetello, and I will do what I can. I think they must soon set you free. You have harmed no one. You have offended the law, perhaps, but so innocently, and no law of God or nature, but only the trumpery vexatious rule of man. I am sure soon they must set you free ; but if they do not, bars have been sawn through ere now, and stouter ones than these, and there is the sea

at hand—and—and I want you to believe, if I should help you to escape, if there should be no other means, never, never will I presume on any service I may have done to you. Once free you shall never see me again. I am not a cur, I would never plead to you by what I might have done——’

His eyes were glistening, his voice was feeble with haste and emotion, and eagerness to assure her that no self-seeking thoughts or selfish hopes were stirring him; the strength of love that was in his soul lifted him out of common egotistic passion; he in truth forgot himself in her.

She did not answer; she scarcely heard him; after he had spoken she thought over his words but dully, and with little faith in them. To escape; yes; that would be blessed indeed; but she did not wish to owe him anything. She thought Este would sooner choose that she should suffer here than become free by the aid of any hand not his.

The love of the Sicilian, even in its simplicity, honesty, and generosity, had always struck a chord of anger in her. She had always wondered if she had been too familiar with a stranger that morning on the

sands that he had thus been led to fasten his fancy on her.

He waited a little while in hope that she might answer him, that the hint of escape might at the least rouse some flutter of the old bold spirit in her. But he waited in vain. She was ready, indeed, to escape by any means of her own, in any way, at any hour of the night or day, but she did not accept his help. It seemed to her, without her reasoning out her instinct, that to take any benefit from any man was in a measure to be false to her lover.

He waited with beating heart and longing ear ; but she said nothing.

‘ It is best to see what one can do, without, with all these brutes,’ he thought, and turned to go.

‘ You will know I am always ready,’ he said softly ; and then the gaoler repeated his summons, and the door unclosed and he passed through it and was gone.

She did not even look up once.

Daniello Villamagna went out of the gloomy place into the intense light of the noonday that was shining on the salt lagoon till it glistened like a mirror of steel.

His shrewd sense told him that his first

care should be to find a good advocate ; his next, as he had little faith in those land sharks who live by the adversity of other men, was to study all ways and means by which, in case of any condemnation of her, her rescue might be compassed.

These two things he did, and put all his soul and his might into them, and praised Heaven that he had made enough gains out of his latest voyage to be able to throw money about in her cause without much prudence.

All the hot listless day in the dull seaport town he spent his whole time in pondering over that which he might do, and to the advocate he had hired he said again and again : ‘ Let her think the judge has appointed you ; if she knew I had spoken to you, she would be angered : she is very proud, pray let her never know.’

And when the man of law pressed for his reasons in having this great anxiety for her, he answered once for all : ‘ I have seen her but thrice—out of doors, by the edge of the sea—and she thinks nothing of me, and never will think anything ; but she is as innocent as the rock-doves yonder, and I love her well, though never, I tell you—

oh never!—shall I be more to her than yon weeds that grow in the *stagno*.'

There was that accent of passionate truth in him which carries conviction to its hearers whenever it can obtain a hearing.

He was well known along all the seaboard of Maremma; even her accusers began to think better of her since the dauntless sailor of Palermo loved her.

As the people of the Orbetellano sat about by the sea-wall, and spread out their nets to dry in the sun, they began to say, after all, 'her story might be true—why not? And the tide of opinion turned in her favour.

All through the hottest weather he stayed there, and was thankful that he had leisure and time to serve her.

Once, in each two weeks, they let him see her in the presence of the guards or gaoler; and he persuaded her to speak a little, very little, enough to give him some clue by which to do something for her. The name of Este, of course, she never spoke. They might have kept her there all the years of her life, but she would never have disclosed it.

He only saw her thus in cruel fleeting

moments which wrung his inmost soul, but he stayed on, glad to be able to feel himself her only friend, glad to be able to watch for hours together the little grated window of her cell.

He and the advocate he employed, and on whom he spent all the gains of his latest voyages, hunted the Apennines for the shepherd's wife of whom Musa spoke once, when the lawyer retained by Daniello Villamagna asked her if there was no one who could testify that her little child had died of a newborn child's mere feebleness. Musa knew only that the woman was called Pomfilia, and that her husband's name was Nerone, and on that slender help they had to rely, and did at length trace the shepherd and his family from Maremma up to those chestnut woods on the sides of the Pistoiese hills where their summer home was made.

They also called on the priest of Santa Tarsilla, who, although when he heard of the coffin of Joconda having been taken away without his sexton even missing it was deeply incensed and terrified, yet was too tender-hearted a man to refuse his testimony that the girl reared by Joconda Romanelli, in his parish, had been always of

innocent life and noble, if of strange and wayward temper.

Who she was by birth he could not tell. That secret had died with his predecessor.

Daniello knew, but he shut it in his own heart as she shut her lover's name.

The hot months went by, and she lived through them in her misery as the caged lark lives beating his breast against his bars. The greatest terror to her was that of which she never spoke : lest Este should return to the tombs in her absence, and, angered at what would seem her faithlessness, go without knowing the truth.

On the other hand, there was always the faint hope in her that he might hear, and come to Orbetello.

The months passed, and the law court opened earlier than the custom of it was, because there was a great case of fraud, in which public names were involved, for which it was desirable to clear the way by getting through all trials of lesser interest.

By persuasion and some free use of his good money, Daniello's advocate procured the early hearing of her case whilst it was still warm, radiant October weather.

The woman Pomfilia came down from

the mountains, and when Musa was allowed to see her once, the sight of a familiar face did her some little good. It did not occur to her to ask how, or by whom, the shepherd's wife had been summoned; her thoughts were too absorbed, her mind was too much distraught.

Yet she had no fear of any sentence they might pass on her.

'I did no harm' was all that ever she said.

Her old pride, her old courage, her old antagonism to the tyranny of law, gave her strength to hold it at arm's length still.

Her father's spirit awoke in her.

They might capture, they should not subdue her, they should not humiliate her.

There were other days in the stifling, thronged audience-chamber; other long discourses, now from this speaker, now from that; other terrible weary hours filled with the buzz of tongues, the stench of the crowd, the wordy vapourings of petty pompous people. She was brought in and set in their midst, and she understood nothing of it; no more than the trapped hawk understands why he is caught in the cruel wires.

It all went past her ear like a confused noise without sense or meaning.

She vaguely comprehended that some one whom she did not know was pleading in her favour, and trying to set her free.

But she was always thinking, 'In Mantua they condemned him, all innocent as he was; men pleaded in his favour too, he said, but they condemned him; so will they me.'

She had no hope that they would understand her and let her go.

The woman Pomfilia gave simple, straightforward testimony as to the exceeding love she had borne the little child, and the despair its death had caused her. The woman added that she herself did not know that it was wrong to have said nothing, and made the little grave there; had the child lived it would have been carried to Telamone and baptised there. That she knew would have been done.

The evidence of the woman, timid before the law, but honest, went far with the judge and with the listening audience of seafaring folk and peasants.

Then they brought forth the little traitor Zefferino, who grew white and shook as with a palsy when he looked across the hall and saw her face.

‘Thou also!’ said the scorn and sorrow of her grand calm eyes.

When he recovered a little from that trepidation of terror, he swore glibly enough that on the first day when she had taken him down into the tombs there had been much gold, much; it lay in heaps and heaps, so he affirmed; and when he had returned thither the next day by himself—not meaning to touch it, oh no! only to look if it were safe—he saw none there, none at all; it must have been carried away in the night. He declared that she had the *mal’ occhio*, and that she had threatened his life because he took two travellers to see the *buche delle fate*, and that he had gone to dwell at Populonia because he went in perpetual peril from her vengeance. He told his tale very convincingly, and with pretty childish innocence of bearing.

When he had quite ended, her voice rang out like a clarion in defiance of him, of her accusers, of her judges, of all the listening people.

‘You are a miserable traitor,’ she cried to him. ‘I sheltered you from the storm; I fed you often; I was attached to you; I dealt honestly and well with you always;

and you betrayed my sanctuary for two silver pieces. You are a son of Iscariot, go! For the gold, you know well that the galley-slave Saturnino Mastarna robbed the dead and took it. It was his own undoing here in the Orbetellano. You know that. You are a son of Iscariot; you stole my old mule in his days of weakness to sell him away into misery. You are vile as a viper that stings the hand that has spared its life. Go! Away from my sight, go!’

He slunk between the guards; and there was that in her glance, in her voice, in her attitude, which thrilled the hearts of the people, who before were steeled against her.

These days in the public court were very terrible to her.

She had dwelt in her moorland solitudes till she was shy of every human glance, till every sound, save the dreamy sounds of the hills and woods, was harsh and jarring to her. As the arum-leaves lie hidden in the shadow of deep dells, so had she been shrouded underneath the greenness of the earth.

Torn from her shelter, and dragged into the crude light of noon, with hundreds of hard eager eyes fastened upon her, and the buzz and bray of human voices deafening

her ears, she was bewildered as an animal is, dragged from his jungle or his desert into the glare and hooting crowds of a menagerie to make the sport of fools. The natural courage in her, and that instinctive dignity, so common in classic ages and so little seen in ours, made her hide all the alarm she suffered ; but she suffered all the more that she stood there like any statue made of bronze, and never winced, and let her eyes rest in cold disdain upon the faces of her accusers and her judge.

She had said the truth once.

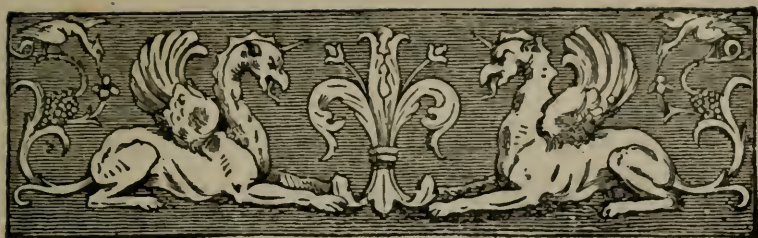
She opened her lips no more.

The Pretore at length, after long preamble, and an examination lasting three days, censured her in a long discourse with severity, but pronounced her free ; the accusation being dismissed as non-proven.

She heard the sentence of deliverance without any movement of gratitude or joy. Her proud serenity of repose remained unbroken.

‘ Why not have found me guiltless before you punished me with these long frightful months ? ’ she thought ; but aloud she said only : ‘ I may go back—now ? ’

That was the one desire panting, like a netted bird, at her heart.



CHAPTER LVII.

WHEN a little while later the formalities were fulfilled, and she was allowed to leave her prison, homeless, friendless, penniless, but free, she understood why Este had gone : why love had become nothing to him beside that ecstasy of liberty.

The hot light whirled round her in giddy circles, her limbs were weakened by long and harsh captivity, she was feeble and faint, but she was almost once more happy. The earth was her own once more, and somewhere on the earth was her lover.

‘If only they had left me that little grave,’ she thought.

On the threshold of the prison there met

her an old shrivelled man ; the steward, her accuser.

He muttered quickly, in some shame :

‘ My dear—I am sorry—I had too much zeal—go back to the sepulchres if you will ; go back ; and the little child is buried in God’s ground, buried beside Joconda, do not be afraid.’

Then he hurried away, being in great fear of her.

For Daniello Villamagna had said to him, ‘ If you will not disturb her in those tombs she loves I will rent them of you at a hundred scudi by the year, and your lord need never know.’

They had brought her out by the white salt-covered shore ; and she stood still a moment, drinking in the autumnal air : all her soul, and mind, and body absorbed in one unspoken prayer, praising heaven that she was free.

She had not a friend in the world, nor any roof to cover her, nor even a coin to buy bread.

But she was not troubled by this ; she was absorbed in thinking, ‘ How can I get back ? ’ They might tell her, how they would, not to go there ; this was her

one thought. How would he find her elsewhere? And was not his memory there with every remembered hour of joy? The temptation came to her to go and seek him, but she thrust it away. She said to herself: 'I must not remind him of his debt.'

Nay, though she died of longing to look upon his face she would never do that.

It was afternoon. Though close on autumn the sultriness of summer had not abated there. The air was still thick with mosquitoes. The sails of the boats out at sea hung like painted sails of wood. Some men were killing a half-dead shark; his eyes rolled in horrible futile agony; they were cutting the live flesh off his spine.

Pale shores stretched on either side, pale mountains slid away into heat mists in the distance. Everything was still feverish, pallid, weary with that ghastly weariness of great heat which makes the ice-floe and the north wind seem in desire as paradise; the heat which blanches and enfeebles and fevers and wastes all in one; the heat in which flowers and birds wither and pant, and children droop as the tall stems of the sunflowers do; the heat in which all the beauty goes out of

the land, and the trees grow grey, and the skies are ash colour.

In all that pallor and whiteness of the sickly town and the low-lying shore and the feeble people, the figure of Musa stood out with the grace and the rich colour of some crown imperial lily growing out of sand, straight as a young palm, luminous, golden, distinct.

She knew the danger of the marshes. She did not wish to die: who does that loves? Whilst the earth feels the steps of the feet we adore, to live is beautiful; whilst the eyes that we love uncloseto the day, the sunrise that wakens them still smiles at us.

She shrank from any thought of death, since death would be eternal silence, endless separation; and she knew that to sleep on the swamps was death as sure as to drown in the deep sea. Yet the swamps stretched between her and the moorland tombs.

A hag came up and hissed in her ear that with such a face and such a form as hers money was to be had thick as the salt upon the sands, and Musa turned on her her great troubled eyes, half in wonder, half in scorn, and the woman shrank away.

She stood irresolute upon the shining shore; the old hag looked longingly at her, but dared not speak again. Something in the grand innocence of those troubled eyes awed and frightened her.

‘Will you not even take my boat?’ said the voice of Daniello near her, as he came from under the shadow of the sea-wall, and stood in her path, submissive, timid, with bared head as before an empress.

‘You are all alone,’ he added, feebly and stupidly, not knowing well what he did say.

‘Have I so many friends?’ she said curtly. ‘Nay, do not think I want any. Now they have set me free I need nothing.’

‘But you will not go on foot all that long way to your own moors?’

‘Will I not! It is so long since I have felt the ground under my feet, I could walk on, and on, and on, I think, all day, all night——’

‘You fancy so, because it is beautiful to you to be free. That I understand. But you are not as strong as you were a year ago. You are weaker than you know. You may faint by the way, and if you sleep out, you know that sleep after sunset means death where you go. Will you not let me take you

in my boat? Or, if you choose the inland road, may I not find a mule-cart for you, an ox-waggon? There are plenty in the Orbetellano.'

'You mean kindly,' she said, with her mind made up, and beyond any pressure or inclination from without. 'But I need nothing but the freedom of my feet. It is months since I saw a tuft of grass! That is pleasure enough!'

'Where are you going?'

'I am going home.'

'To those tombs?'

'Where else?'

He was silent. He dared not say to her, 'there is a home in Sicily.'

He dared not. He would almost as soon have dared to strike her a blow.

'The old man said just now he would not drive me out again,' she added; 'I think he was sorry that he had been cruel.'

'I hope he was,' said Villamagna simply. 'But oh, my dear, that is no place for you; a hole fit only for the fox, and the bat, and the owl. Will you not think a little before you return to it?'

A smile flitted over her face—pale as a moonbeam, but of ineffable tenderness.

‘It is dearer to me than if it were a palace. I would never live elsewhere. You have been good to me, that I see ; but let me go now, and do not follow me.’

He looked at her with infinite longing ; but he drew out of her path and left her to go onward unmolested and unquestioned. In the amorous impetuosity of his nature, a finer and a rarer feeling had come since her misfortunes had made her sacred to him. He had done her some service, so his lips were sealed, as were hers to Este. He could not say to her, ‘this you owe to me,’ without becoming a base hound in his own sight.

‘After all I have done so little,’ he thought. ‘But more she would not take.’

She would never know that he had done anything ; in all likelihood she would never have enough sympathy for, or remembrance of, him to guess the share that he had had in her release. But he thought it was best so. If she had known she might have been humbled, angered, troubled. She might have even been afraid to go back to that solitude which was all she knew of safety, all she cared for as home.

And other thoughts thronged on him.

He had been born amidst the forests that deck the seaward side of Etna, and the fires of the mountain were in his blood and in his soul. He had been always taught from childhood that a just vengeance was a holy thing ;—that women might sit down and weep, but that men should scorch their tears up with a dagger's flash and the smoke of blood justly shed.

All these days he had been saying always to himself, 'Who is the coward that has left her alone? Who is the beast that has forsaken her?' and thinking and thinking, thus perpetually, of one thing he had come slowly to put together this and that, and to divine that her lover had been the companion of Saturnino, the man of late set free by the same law which had condemned him.

But he was not sure.

No tortures would have forced the lips of Musa to speak Este's name.

They might have done with her what they would. She had the temper of Greek Læna in her. She would never have spoken.

He let her go away from him along the sad sea-shore with the strewn weeds steaming in the torrid sun ; then with a few long

steps he overtook her and spoke in her ear.

‘It was the Mantuan noble that you loved?’

She turned her head with a quick, frightened anger, but in the warmth that mounted over the pallor of her face, in the look of her dilating eyes, he knew the truth.

She could not lie, she would not speak; with that one swift glance over her shoulder, she shook him off, and hastened on. He had been answered.

He let her go once more onward and northward towards the moors, alone.

She had escaped the horror of years of an imprisoned life only through him; but that she did not know, and he would not have her told of it.

‘She would be angry with me,’ he thought in his humility; the humility which is the sign of all great love. He knew besides how intolerable it would be to her to learn that he had spent money in her defence which she could never hope to be able to repay to him.

He stood motionless, looking after her as long as she was in sight.

When a curve in the land took her from

his eyes, he gave a deep short sigh, he muttered a deadly oath; then he retraced his steps and went back to the harbour where, in the shallow salt water, the lateen craft in which he had come hither was lying moored, the sun on its one white sail. In another moment he had leaped into the boat and cast her loose.

There was wind blowing, a hot wind straight from the east, and full of sand.

He set the boat's head towards far Sardinia, lying hidden in the pallid clouds of heat.

A little way out of the town, as she reached the shade of the pine-woods that lined the shore, the woman Pomfilia overtook her.

‘Let me go with you,’ she cried. ‘You are not well enough to go alone; let me go with you. My husband and the sheep are on the moors; I could go by the boats, but I would rather walk with you.’

‘You are kind to think of it,’ said Musa; ‘but I would sooner be alone.’

‘Ah, you have had a rude time,’ sighed the shepherd's wife, ‘and never might I have heard of it but for that good Sicilian skipper who came up upon my hills at home and

hunted me out and brought me here in time.'

'Did he do that?'

She coloured with pain and vexation; she could not bear to think she owed so much to him.

'Ay, that did he,' said the woman of the Apennines. 'To my thinking, but for him those brutes would have caged you for half your life and more. It would be well if you could care for him; he has a good heart and loves the ground you tread on. I know not what the other one is, nor where; but for sure he left you alone in your trouble and your adversity, and merits nothing.'

She paused, frightened at the look of the eyes which silenced her without any need of speech.

'Go you by the boats,' Musa said curtly. 'For me be not afraid; I know my way home. I thank you for all you have done, and when you want shelter or food come to me. But, if ever you dare speak to me of the Sicilian again, I will not see you ever any more.'

The shepherd's wife shrank away humbly, and went back to the sea-wall, where boats were always coming and going.

Musa passed on under the pines.

She could not have borne the fret and jar of the woman's well-meant condolence and sympathy. She could not have borne the sound of any human voice — save one.

All she could bear to hear was the breathing of the wind amongst the trees, the lap of the sea water on the beach. All human words only lacerated and hurt her, be they gentle as they might.

She had been sorely wounded. The insult of her captivity was bitter to a nature which had inherited all her father's pride, and something of her father's arrogance, with a sensitive reserve that her lonely life had fostered till she shrank like the mimosa from any human touch.

She needed to be alone ; alone with the shadows and the leaves, and the wide waters, and the green wet plain, and all the things that told her she was free.

She found her way back as the hunted hare escaping travels footsore to its form amongst the saintfoin and the spurge.

She was very tired. She was often faint ; she had not a coin upon her ; she slept the night out under a little hut of brake and

ling made for a goatherd, and deserted by him when the heats had come.

She was feeble now; her glorious perfection of health and strength had gone from her, and the symmetrical limbs that had never known ache or pain were now languid, and felt broken as she dragged them over the great silent moorlands.

But the hope of her return sustained her as it sustains the beaten panting fox, or the stockdove with shot in its little aching body that yet flies on to die, if it can, in its own familiar place.

Her one thought, her one terror, was, if he should have been there, if he should have found her absent, would he think her so soon faithless and tired? Would he have gone away in anger and doubt?

That thought of him, and the longing in her to be at home once more, to be by her own hearth and within the walls that held her memories of him, kept up her fainting spirit, kept erect her trembling limbs.

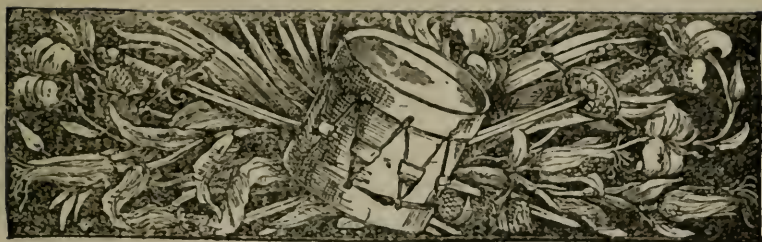
With unutterable joy she at last entered on the wild woodlands, where a rising of the soil let her look away eastward over the sea of foliage, and search with yearning eyes for the landmarks by which she would know

from afar the place of the graves of the Lucumo.

When she saw them at last, and the great suber-oak rose up above its fellows to her sight, then indeed she knew that she was home once more.

She dropped on her knees and praised God.





CHAPTER LVIII.

IN the gloom of the great cork forests of Sardinia Daniello Villamagna found Saturnino Mastarna. They spoke together long in the leafy solitudes of the mountain-side beside the camp-fire lit by the Mastarna men.

In these primeval woods, in these wild untrodden recesses of the almost barbaric isle, the galley-slave was safer than kings are on their thrones. He was once more happy; he sent at pleasure a ball from his rifle down the azure depths of the air; he drank deep and drank often; he had a long fine dagger in his belt; he had danger, plunder, bloodshed, the three things that made the daily bread that he had pined for and hungered for as the first food of life;

he felt once more to have hold on his manhood which they had done all they knew to chain down and cudgel out of him. He could lean against the ledge of granite and look down through three thousand feet of air and foliage on to the blue sea below, and lift his gun to his shoulder, and deal death to whatever distant thing he saw ; that was to live once more.

The Sicilian said to him :

‘ Either you or I——’

And he made answer :

‘ The Mastarna cure their own wounds.’

For the first time in all his lawless and outlawed life, a duty, that he deemed the one sacred, supreme duty of life, rose up before him and claimed him. To pity he might have been deaf ; to shame, indifferent ; to the wrath of earth or heaven, callous ; to the cry of woman or child, adamant ; but when vengeance called aloud to him, he dared not refuse to answer. It was the only invocation before which the men of the blood of the Etruscan Mastarna never ventured to be deaf, or to dally on their road.



CHAPTER LIX.

THE tombs were no longer what they had been, when by means of cleanliness, orderliness, and her own sense of beauty she had contrived to make them into the likeness of a home. The vases, and bowls, and jars had been for the most part broken in pieces by the rabid fury of the disappointed steward, the sculptured Chimæra and Typhon had been hewn from the walls, the best of the bronze utensils and candelabra had been taken, and the statue that Este had made of her had been carried away by the old man in his greed, who, ignorant of all those matters, had imagined it a work of Greek or Roman art. Her mandoline had been thrown down and broken, her spinning-wheel had been

treated in the same way ; the whole place had been defaced, mutilated, profaned ; but she found her bed and bedding, and other things of household use, and all her clothes and linen there ; for the bribes of Daniello Villamagna had been at work here also to secure to her the humble necessities of human life.

She began her existence once more in this lonely abode, sadly content to be once more where all her memories of joy had been garnered, and where her lover, if he looked for her ever, would surely come. She took up the thread of her days where it had been broken, but it was no longer the same.

There was no more the body of the little child beside her ; no more did the coffin of Joconda seem to bring a quiet blessing on the place.

And there were no more for her the joys of a light foot and a glad heart, of a happy ignorance of evil, of a simple self-taught philosophy which was content with finding daily bread and living like the birds of the air, careless of to-morrow, trustful of nature. All these were gone for ever.

Love had passed by there.

But they had let her come back. For

so much she was thankful. She clung to her home underground as the stormy petrel clings to hers.

Without it she would have strayed, miserably and helplessly, as the rooks do for awhile, when their elm-trees are felled and their nests destroyed. After awhile the rooks go and make their home elsewhere, but she could never have done that ; here alone was memory close about her, here alone had love been with her.

She began her life again with something of her old intrepidity, and infinite relief in the peaceful sense of silence round her. She had not a penny in the world ; she had only her two hands with which to maintain herself. There was some store of oats and other things which had escaped the notice of the men, and were safe from the quest of rats in an old coffer which she had brought there on the mule's back long before on the day after Joconda's burial. There was also a little store of rice, beans, coffee, and some wine, which had been put there by the Sicilian when he had persuaded the old steward to allow her the use of the tombs. There was enough to live on for some few weeks ; she looked no further. She would

resume her old habits of work little by little, and so maintain herself.

The consolation of the fresh air, of the sight of the green autumnal earth, of the sounds of fluttering wings and rustling feet of forest creatures, revived the soul in her, gave her back hope and health.

Surely some day he would come.

That was all she thought of: she sat hour after hour looking over the wolds, hoping against hope for a step that never came.

The golden autumnal days went by, beautiful, full of the fragrance of falling leaves, and of the music of the woodlark, and the chaffinch, and the song-sparrow, and the little robins come from the high hills or from foreign lands.

With every dawn that rose she thought, 'Perhaps he will come to-day.' With every nightfall she thought, 'Perhaps to-morrow.'

It was more than a year since Este had sent his messenger to her with his gifts which she had repulsed, and that letter which she had torn in a thousand pieces, when the men of Prince Altamonte had invaded her sanctuary, lest any should take it perforce from her and read it and cause the writer trouble.

A whole year and more had passed by, and she had heard nothing of him, he had given no sign that he remembered her.

True, where he was, amidst his new pleasures and his new riches, her memory passed over him again and again, a score of times each day, with a sharp reproach in it, and he said always to himself, 'to-morrow I will go; next week I will go,' and let the days and the weeks slip away into the abyss of the past.

But she could not tell that. She could only know that he had forgotten. She tried to believe it was but natural and no cruelty. She was young, and she still clung to hope. To-morrow he would come.

One day in early November weather—the grand, buoyant, sunlit weather that comes in this season in these lands, with wondrous pomp of sunsets and lovely noontides warm as midsummer, and a delicious stir and freshness in all the sweet-smelling air—she was sitting at the entrance of the sepulchre, when a figure did appear in the transparent light of early day, and came onward across the grasslands, and she rose and regarded him with dilated eyes, knowing him even though he wore the garb of a Campagna shepherd.

The great, gaunt, sunburnt figure was between her and the sunlight. He looked old; his hair was white, and white were his shaggy eyebrows, from under which his sombre cavernous eyes gazed out in a savage pain, like those of a great animal struck by a bullet. He wore a broad hat and clothes of goatskin, and bore in his hand the crozier-shaped crook of southern shepherds.

He paused before her, leaving some yards of earth between herself and him. He seemed afraid to approach her. She at a glance had known him again.

‘You are Saturnino Mastarna,’ she said, and her voice had neither pity nor scorn in it, but a weary calmness of indifference. Nothing mattered to her.

‘I am Saturnino Mastarna,’ he answered mechanically, whilst his eyes rested on her, and he said to himself, ‘Yes, it is she; Serapia’s child; my child. She has Serapia’s face and mine, blended together, as when we stooped over a stream the water blent in one our two reflections; and all the life and the fire are gone out of her, and it is he who has done that.’

‘You are Saturnino Mastarna,’ she said

again. 'What do you do here? Will they not take you if they see you?'

'They shall not see me; I know how to hide. They watch for me in Sardinia. I have been there with mountain men of Mastarna blood. I got away on a good ship: a Sicilian who loves you pitied me.'

She was silent; it was nothing to her. She only wished that he would go away. It was not fear that she felt for him, but apathy; the apathy of a mind which has but one thought, of a heart which has one emotion.

Then she remembered that this man had once sent her Este; her eyes softened.

'Come inside,' she said to him, 'I will give you bread and a little wine that is there; you will be safer within. Come.'

He followed her. He took the food and the drink, but remained standing. His eyes followed her with a pathetic yearning. He was saying always to himself, 'She is mine, she is Serapia's; and all she knows of me is that I stole her gold, and sent to her the coward who has killed her heart in her before she has seen a score of years on earth.'

She served him with the little she possessed, then seated herself with those

fatigued movements which now nearly always replaced her once vigorous and agile animation.

He leaned against the stone wall where the dancing-boys and the lotus-flowers were painted and rested his gaze on her timidly, as a dog looks that loves and is yet afraid of a blow from the hand he would caress.

‘You sheltered Este?’ he said suddenly.

The little colour that there was in her face faded out of it utterly.

‘I did,’ she answered coldly.

‘You fed him, you tended him, you succoured him, you loved him, you gave him all you had to give; and when they set him free he left you and forgot you—is it not so?’

She lifted her face; it was as cold as marble, and as stern.

‘When I blame him, then may you. Leave his name alone.’

‘I sent him to you—I!’

‘It is for that I bid you break my bread,’ she said, with so great and exquisite a tenderness melting the coldness of her voice that it thrilled even the savage and brutalised soul of Saturnino.

He said nothing; he was thinking of that

night of flight when, under the snows of Monte Labbro, lying beneath the tangle of ruscus and arbutus where the Fiora water ran between the rocks, he had said to his companion of the galleys:

‘To that tomb there comes a maiden with grand eyes like two stars. She will let you shelter there, and will not speak, I think; but if you fear her speaking—well, a fawn’s neck is soon slit.’

Why had not his tongue rotted with cancer in his mouth ere ever it had spoken those words!

‘I sent him to you! I sent him to you!’ he muttered; and he could not comprehend why she—his daughter and Serapia’s!—did not leap up in rage and curse him. There had been but one answer from the Mastarna to what was faithless. Yet she, she bade him welcome because he had sent this man to her!

He did not understand. He looked down on her with his angry and bloodshot eyes; furious imprecations rose to his lips, but something in the look of her held him mute; he was afraid to say the thing he thought.

Should he tell her what he was to her?

Should he claim her by that tie of parentage?

Should he say to her, 'I, who stole your gold, I, who have a hundred murders on my soul, I, whose name the Maremma has shuddered at and gloried in, I am your father?'

He had been a selfish tyrant always; a brute, with little thought but for his own passions, his own greeds, his own revenge; seldom, since his earliest years, had he felt any single unselfish or generous impulse such as had moved him when he had found the grandson of Joconda sleeping in the snow; and the accursed life of the galleys, that scorches up every well-spring of feeling, and withers up every slender shoot of better instincts, had made him a devil rather than a man.

But now a movement of generosity, of self-sacrifice, stirred in him.

Better, he thought, better and kinder to leave her in ignorance for ever; better not to lean the weight of his own immeasurable guilt, of his own unutterable past, upon her. She had burden enough already.

It was the first instinct of any nobility, of

any self-denial, that had ever moved him since the hour that Joconda had held up her stoup of wine to his mouth in the cathedral square of Grosseto.

He longed to fall down before her; to cry aloud to her; to say to her—‘Pity me, if you cannot love me; your mother loved me once!’

His heart, so long denied all natural affections, so long without any kind of tenderness given or received, so long barren as the rock in the midst of the salt water on which he had been caged, grew thirsty with longing to slake itself at these simple springs of natural love at which the poorest can drink and for awhile feel rich.

He had been a fierce and cruel creature, often following his instincts as the tiger and the vulture followed theirs; but he had not been without fine impulses here and there, and he had been capable of love.

All his soul looked on her now out of his deep wild eyes. The words rushed to his lips that would tell her the truth; words which never again could be effaced. Almost he had cast himself down before her and cried to her—‘I stole your gold, I

sent your lover here, I have a thousand crimes upon my head, I am steeped in human blood; but I am yours, and you are mine: take me, hide me, pardon me, pity me!’

But something stronger than himself, more powerful even than this hunger for compassion and affection which possessed him, held him mute.

He had done her harm enough; why should he do her more injury?

The dead woman of Savoy had kept his secret faithfully; should he do less?

He, who never had stayed his tongue in cursing, or held his hand back from a blow, choked down the passionate desire in him and said to himself: ‘Nay; why should she know?’

Why should she know?

Why should he lay his burden of foul sins upon the back of this, his lamb? It seemed to him that if he told her he would do the cruellest thing ever done in all his years of cruelty. He, who had hurled a traitor over the rocks like a mere bough of dead wood, and drawn his steel without a pause across the throats of harmless captives, dared not do this one last selfishness.

He would take his life in his hand, he thought, and go out and wander alone, and leave her in ignorance. He would avenge her: that was all he had to do with her.

She, forgetful of him, sat on the stone seat; her head drooping, her hands crossed on her knee.

He looked at her, and said to himself that this one good deed he would do ere he died, he would keep silence; he would not speak in weakness and self-pity, as a woman would have spoken.

He would avenge her; and life might blossom afresh for her. When the summer is young, if the spikenard and the balm are mown down with the grass, they send forth new blooms from the bleeding roots. So he thought.

He leaned against the stone of the wall, and forgot that he was an outlaw and a hunted felon. He only remembered that he was her father, and, so, Este's judge.

He saw the face of her lover as it had been with him in the twilight of the woods, in the scorch of the sunlight on the sea, a beautiful, proud, pensive face, like one of Signorelli's angels; and he stretched his hands out, his sinewy hands, with their

grip of steel, that had done to death so many, and in fancy he clenched the slender fair throat that had uttered false words, and made the mouth that had kissed her open wide in the ghastly smile of suffocation, and choked the flickering breath into silence.

A cry of horror from her at his look roused him from his trance.

‘What do you see? What do you think of?’ she said, as she rose in terror. ‘There is no one here who would injure you. I am alone; all alone.’

‘Yes; you are alone,’ said Saturnino with a strange look, as he withdrew his mind with painful effort from the vision that had absorbed him. She was alone: she who had loved her lover as few women love on earth.

He gathered himself together with a heavy sigh; such as might burst from the aching heart of a lion that lay dying on the desert sands with the vultures waiting above head in the light.

He shook his rough clothes, and felt for his long knife safe within his bosom.

Then he stood before her a moment and looked at her; he did not speak.

‘You will hurt no one?’ she said, touched to a vague anxiety at his aspect.

‘I will never hurt you,’ he answered her, with a tenderness deep as her own when she breathed Este’s name.

‘Lay your hand on my forehead one moment, he said a little later, ‘and wish me my sins forgiven.’

He stooped to her as he spoke.

She hesitated a brief while; then she made the sign of the cross on his brow, and rested her hand on it an instant as he had asked.

‘I wish you well,’ she said softly, ‘I wish you well on earth, and after death may God be merciful to you. I bless you, for you sent me him!’

Saturnino rose erect, with a curse; his face lost in one moment its fleeting gentleness, and grew black as a night in tempest.

‘Do I owe your touch to his memory?’ he said savagely through his ground teeth.

Then he gazed at her once more; furiously, longingly, thirstily; and without other words turned his face from her and went out into the open day.

Once he looked back.

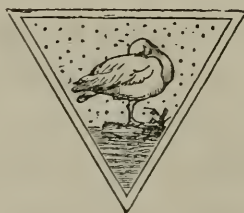
Already she had forgotten both his presence and his departure.

She was seated on the low stone chair, thoughtful, passive ; her hands were lying on her knee ; her eyes rested upon the ground ; her whole body seemed to listen for a step that never came ; her whole soul was absorbed in remembrance.

He looked one instant, and yet another, and another ; and yet another still—his gaze, he knew, would never rest on her again.

Then he drew his long slim dagger from its sheath and let the sun-rays play on it ; it was an old friend, a loyal comrade ; he had no other upon earth.

Then he took his way across the marshes and the moorlands ; going southward, where Rome lay.





CHAPTER LX.

AS he passed away over the moss-grown earth, and she sat there in the shadow of the Lucumo's chamber, some sudden perception of his words, some sudden sense of the menace which had been in them, came to her, breaking through her absorbed mind as the glare of a torch burns through a dull grey fog.

Whilst he was with her the full purport of what he had said had not dawned on her ; she had dully wondered why this man, a stranger, an outlaw, should think of her in any way ; but now, in his absence, certain of his muttered disconnected words came back on her recollection. A great dread suddenly seized her ; surely danger menaced Este.

Perhaps, she thought, this man was mad, perhaps his long accumulated crimes, and his many years of captivity, had made him lose his reason ; but, mad or sane, remembering how he had looked, how he had spoken, she began to doubt, she began bitterly to lament that she had blessed him and wished his sins forgiven him. Assassination had been no more to him than the slitting of the kid's throat is to the butcher ; human life had never been of more account to him than the grass of the field as it drops is to the mower ; he, like Etruscan Tarquin, had held men of no greater sanctity than the poppies growing with the corn.

There had been cruel hate in him when he had spoken of Este ; why had she not seen that before, why had she let him go away ? An agony of fear came on her ; the worst of all fear to bear because it was so vague.

Instinct rather than any reasoning made her feel that the return of Saturnino meant some peril, if not the greatest, to her lost lover.

Would aught save crime have had the power to lure him from the secrecy of the Sardinian forests ?

She thought not.

She remembered the gleam in his great black eyes when he had spoken Este's name, the steel-like gleam of an unquenchable hatred.

Some sinister motive must have brought the outlaw from those dark glades where he was safe from arrest unless the State sent soldiery swarming through the forests and over the mountains in greater numbers than it would ever spare for the mere sake of capturing a galley-slave; and her instinct told her that no motive would be ever so grave, no magnet ever so powerful, to the brigand of Santa Fiora as vengeance: such vengeance as can only quench its thirst in blood, such vengeance as on the soil of the Italiote has ever been held as justice and as holiness.

She could not tell what root his desire of vengeance sprang from; whether it were some fancied wrong long brooded over, some smouldering fire of antagonism, which had burst into flame in envy at Este's liberty; or whether it were some fantastic sense of amends owing from him to her, because, through him Este had first come to the shelter of the tombs; she had heard in days of her childhood the stories that were told

in Maremma of the impulses of capricious honour, of uncertain generosity, which had at times broken through the ferocity and selfishness of his natural temper. Which of these might be the motive that ruled him she could not tell ; but such instinct as makes the dog scent danger for his master, whilst yet nothing is seen or heard, made her tremble for the one whom she loved, whom she had so long sheltered and defended that to save him from his enemies was still second nature to her.

In an instant the thought that Este still might need her poured new life into her limbs, awakened the old bold spirit in her that had sunk into the apathy of sorrow, and revived in her alike the courage and the subtlety which had so often served him when he had been a hunted criminal with a price set on his head. She knew at once what she would do, what she must do.

In open dispute she could never hope to vanquish or disarm Saturnino Mastarna ; by betrayal of him she could never stoop to arrest his steps, she would sooner have killed him ; she knew that what she had to do was to watch him, and if he let Este alone, then would she in turn leave him

alone. She knew that she might suspect him falsely, but that if his soul were bent on guilt no words of hers would turn him from it; whilst on the other hand, if he had no such thought, to gall him by suggestion and accusation of it might sting into crime a temper which had always found in crime the fiercest joy and most lasting desire of life.

She wasted not one moment, but took her course with that swift decision which had often served her in good stead. In Este's service she recovered the elasticity, the force, the energy, the physical animation, which since he had left her had gone out of her as utterly as its colour and palm-like grace go out of a dianthus that has been plucked from its place in the rocks beneath the sea and cast down to perish on the sand.

She took some bread, some maize, and a gourd of water, took that three-edged poignard of Florence which Este had found in the brigand's lair by Santa Fiora, and had left behind him here, took one little silver piece that had remained in the old coffer with the corn, and, closing the stone doors of the tombs behind her, went out on the track of Saturnino.

To her skilled eye, used to trace such slender signs, the marks of his footsteps were visible on the wet mossy ground he had traversed. She followed them; they went always southward, straight ahead to that golden horizon where Rome lay, sixty miles or more beyond the moors, out of sight, sunk down in the sunlit ocean of the air.

Her heart stood still as that southward direction of his steps brought confirmation of that sudden fear which had dawned on her as though its light were shed from heaven. But it was not for the first time that terror gave her fresh courage, as the spur wrenches fresh effort from the sinking horse. To baffle and disarm this man would need all her prudence and all her boldness, that she knew; and almost her terror was effaced by the sense of returning happiness which came to her with the thought of once more shielding Este from any danger.

She walked on and on, cautiously though quickly; stooping every now and then to verify the traces of Saturnino's passage through the woodland. There was but one path practicable southward; and she knew

that he would not dare to show himself on the main road, the once Consular and Imperial Highway that ran far nearer the moor than did this mule track over the moors and meadows, which was only in use by the charcoal-burners, the herdsmen, the foresters, and the hunters, and which now mounted over tufa or sandstone rocks, now delved down into wooded hollows, and now was interrupted by brawling streams descending from the hills.

She had walked perhaps three miles from her own abode, when a rise in the ground let her look far ahead, and in the bright light, dark against the sunny sky, still holding on straight towards the south, she saw the tall gaunt figure she pursued. He was moving quickly, still clad in the goatskin clothes which shepherds wear, and still carrying the crozier-shaped crook and the wallet on his back.

. She had him in sight; she breathed more freely; now there was nothing to do but to keep upon his track and go wherever he went, unseen by him. It would be difficult and it would be dangerous; but her spirit was not lightly daunted, once aroused.

She felt for the dagger in her girdle as he

had felt for his; it was the only sure friend that either of them trusted. She drew the breezy autumn air more deeply into her lungs, that she might get strength from it as men do from draughts of wine. She walked on, keeping in his path as surely as his shadow did, watching with untiring eyes every movement that he made; now losing him perforce from sight as the ground he traversed sank beneath the bushes, regaining sight of him as he emerged from the scrub of myrtle, of oak, or of olive, and climbed some rugged steep over which the bridle-path ran.

She marvelled that he dared be out thus in open daylight; but he trusted to his disguise in part, and in part to the fact that the State believed him in Sardinia, and hunted him no more, letting sleeping dogs lie as the proverb bade them do. In truth they were not unwilling that he should thus escape; his name had once been like a trumpet-call to all Maremma, and they were content that he should get away and trouble the law no more. He had suffered sixteen years of the galleys; to all the populace this seemed punishment enough, too much in truth, for a bold, open-handed son of the soil who had

taken to the hills as other men took to the ploughshare or the forge. He knew that the popular sympathy would everywhere be with him, timid, yet strong enough to make the law sometimes willingly blind. Relying on it, and on the solitariness of the Maremma wilds, he walked boldly on towards his goal, and she, unseen by him, followed step for step.

Happily for her he only moved by day, and this by reason that the nights were moonless, and the half-covered mule tracks which he alone durst follow could not be found, even by his knowledge of the country, after dark. So at night sleep did refresh her, even though it were fitful, startled, and roofless. The owls flew by her and the pole-cat glided past, and the bats and the rodents stirred the air and the grass, and the wild ducks rushed by on the chill northern winds. But these were all old friends and comrades; she was afraid of no creatures of the earth and sky. She slept on a pile of fallen leaves, in the hollow of a tree, on the leeward side of a rock, anywhere that gave her momentary rest, and let her see from some safe shelter Saturnino arise and go forth as the dawn came.

For three days she kept him in sight often enough to be able to follow in his track. For three nights, when he crept within some hut that he had made for as a shelter, she wrapped herself in her woollen mantle, and rested amongst the leaves hard by, and slept fitfully the deep dreamless sleep of great bodily fatigue.

It was late in autumn ; it was not certain death to pass the night abroad as it was in summer seasons. Cool winds from the north had swept away the noxious gases of the canicular heats ; there were damp and cold to dread, but the malaria had in a great measure gone with the past summer. Moreover, her nerves were at that tension, her mind was in that overwrought anxiety, in which women, through all ages of the world, have performed miracles and passed through physical dangers of all kinds without physical harm.

There was always with her the dread lest at any moment he should see her and take her for a spy upon him, and slit her throat with his knife as he had once bade Este do. There was the dread, also, lest at any moment, from the mequalities of the ground and the impos-

sibility of drawing near to him, he should escape her sight and go whither she could not follow him. When sleep conquered her despite herself, and pressed her heavy eyelids downwards, she awoke with the apprehension of his having gone away from his resting-place during the night whilst she slept. If she once fairly lost him from view, she might, she knew, never come on his track again ; and now that she had left the territory that was familiar to her, and crossed the Fiora water, and come upon lands that were utterly strange to her, she might, if she lost sight of him, lose her own way hopelessly, and perish of hunger on the waste.

He, she saw, turned aside at times into the huts of shepherds or of the ploughmen come to till the corn-lands, and there no doubt ate, and paid for what he ate with Sardinian pence, and no doubt told them he was a shepherd, too, going towards the Campagna to rejoin his flocks. But she had only the loaf of bread and the handful of maize she had brought with her ; they would last her, eaten sparingly, four or five days, but after that she would have nothing except the one little silver piece, and she

began to be afraid lest her strength should fail her ere she knew whither he went.

Between sunrise and sunset he covered from fifteen to twenty miles, and she did the same. Two years before such walking as this would have been mere sport to her ; but now she was no longer as strong as she had been, her splendid vitality had been rudely shaken, and her limbs began to tremble as she moved, and she began at times to stumble and recover herself with effort. Still she kept onwards, and was scarcely sensible of anything she felt from the passion of anxiety that possessed her. She could not but believe some wicked purpose sent this murderer on this strange pilgrimage on foot to Rome.

Of the land he knew every rood. In all the province there was not a mule-track he had not followed, not a cluster of hovels he had not visited in those many years of vigil and of violence, when his lair had been made by the snows of Monte Labbro, and his gallant person had been pointed out with pride at the feasts of the mountain villages, and even in the market-places of Grosseto, of Massa, and of Volterra. He was at home here in these woodlands, on these moorlands,

as any dog-fox that had burrowed there from the time it had been a cub. The map of all this wild country was clear in his brain, and all that the prisons had done to him had not made one memory fainter of all that labyrinth of foliage, all that desert of green pasture, all those untrodden hillsides, all those barren moors silent as Sahara.

As a child he had run through them barefoot, light-hearted as the scampering goats; as a man he had ridden over them, trodden through them, hidden there, fought there, there loved and hated, and there called with one shrill whistle a score of his men from bush and briar. Until the iron heel of that great gaoler Death should stamp his brain out into nothingness, he would remember every wind of the dizzy path up the face of the rocks, every spring that coursed through the moss and the ling, every hole to hide in where the wild olive grew with the holy-thorn above the ruddy travertine or the yellow sandstone.

So he dreamt not of descending to the sea-shore, but held on his way inland; whilst the Apennines that had given him shelter so long behind their ramparts of

stone cast their wide purple shadows over the plain.

And behind him, unseen, followed the tall, slender figure of Musa, with the sun shining on her pale stern face, and in her luminous eyes; as if the God he had outraged so long had bidden a young angel, an *angiolin*, come down from its watch amidst the moving worlds of heaven to follow in the footsteps of this one bloodstained, brutal, human creature.

He, knowing nothing, pursued his way, whilst the noonday light and the afternoon shades in turn came across his path. Rome was still fifty miles away, if one.

Her greatest fear was lest he should descend to the sea, and take the sea way south; if he did that it would be impossible to follow him or to know whither he went; even if her boat had not been lost, she could not have gone back for it in time to overtake any craft in which he might sail.

But he did not go down towards the shore. He was indeed afraid of the coast, where at every hamlet there was some rural guard, some watchman, or some soldier quartered at one of those Martello towers which dot the shore at intervals.

Every rood of the soil that she trod was full of Etruscan memories, but that she knew not.

Here had been Vulci and Toscania ; here had been Tarquinii and its vast necropolis ; here had been Cære and the Centum Cellæ ; the melancholy Marta flowing through immense and silent meadows to the sea, the low sombre hills that rose and fell in monotonous sequence, and now revealed the bell-fries of Corneto, and now the blue waters by what had once been Gravisçæ, whilst on the eastward they rose higher and higher, and met the dark grey wall of the mighty Ciminian, half hidden in stormy clouds—all, all, had been Etruria Maritima, and beneath the mastic and the locust-tree, beneath the matgrass of the moors and the salt-rush of the marsh, there were cities, and palaces, and ramparts, and labyrinths, and necropoles, with their buried treasures that never more would see the light of day.

But she knew nothing of this.

She only saw a sad wild country that was unknown to her, vegetation that grew scantier and sicklier at each step, green swamps that had a familiar look, and moorlands that looked endless, and had no living

creature anywhere upon them save the meek and melancholy buffalo, and the wild mares and colts that here and there swept like a hurrying wind over the brown grasslands.

Rome, too, said nothing to her.

The name that alike the poet and the scholar, the devotee and the agnostic, can never hear without emotion, to her had no meaning save as a place where her lover dwelt. In her childhood she had heard speak of Rome as of the city of the Holy Father, and had had vague fancies of it as of a great white throne set upon the everlasting hills, with walls of ivory and gates of gold, and all the angels as its ministers, and on it for ever a light like that of sunrise.

That had been her vision of it as a child.

Now she knew it was what men called a city: a place terrible to her as of meeting roofs and brawling crowds; a place where he lived, and living, forgot Maremma.

‘Is it far, so very far, to Rome?’ she wondered, with a sinking heart and tired feet.

Saturnino had still chosen the inland instead of the seaward way; he still feared those watch-towers of the coast, the soldiery who were perpetually on vigil to seize the smugglers from the isles,

In lieu of descending to follow the Via Aurelia where it wound down a few miles off the coast, by Santa Marinella and Santa Severa and mediæval Palo, and the volcanic soil and the steep ravines by Cervetri, where the long avenues of cliff sepulchres are all that remain to show the site of Cære, and gaining so the mouth of Tiber to ascend the stream in any boat that he might find by Fiumicino, he still struck across the country by cattle-tracks known alone to himself and wild men like him, and chose to leave the Maccarese morasses untrodden in his rear, and followed the course of the Arrone river as far as the high cliffs up by forsaken Galera.

At this deserted rock-village he slept that night, the fifth night of his pilgrimage, and she, still unseen by him, climbed also in the twilight of the early autumn night, and there rested also as a hill-hare worn out with travel might have done.

He, all unconscious that she was near, slept soundly with rude stones for his bed.

In his days of pride his range had sometimes swept as far as those wood-clothed cliffs that rise about the lake of Bracciano, the Lacus Sabatinus of the Romans. In that time he had been well known in

all this country side, and the wayside winehouse further away on the stream of the Due Fossi had once been proud to entertain the lordly brigand from the Apennine hills when it had seemed good to him to sweep down on travellers too curious and too incautious, riding or driving out by the Via Flaminia to see Veii or Scrofano or the classic baths of Apollo's Vicarello.

Ere the light of daybreak had come over the green mountain of Rocca Romana in the east, he rose this night from his rough couch of stones, and broke his fast on dried goat's-flesh and a draught from his flask of wine, and then began to descend the hills, using greater prudence and more wariness now that he neared Rome.

Musa, who had been yet earlier awake, had bathed her face and feet in the Arrone, and was watching to see him stir, herself screened amidst the brushwood.

It was a fair morning, golden and light.

Over the Campagna away southward there were white mists that hovered longest where the Tiber rolled, but eastward on these rocks the woods were all alight with sunbeams, and the glancing streams ran sparkling through grasses, starred with dragon-

flower and cyclamen, and shaded with heavy boughs of beech and chestnut.

Even in the strained, vague terror which filled her mind to the exclusion of any other emotion, a sense of the beauty of this morning smote her, and her eyes involuntarily dwelt upon the scene around her.

Before her, some sixteen miles away, there was a dome that lifted itself from the circling mists and the green shadows of a great plain; a dome that looked blue as a hyacinth, ethereal as a shadow itself, against the clearness of the morning skies. The plain was the Roman Campagna, and the dome was the dome of San Pietro.

She did not know it, but dimly she divined it. Something of that ineffable thrill which comes to all who thus behold it moved her even in her ignorance.

‘Yonder must be Rome,’ she thought, and knelt a moment on the grass, forgetting Saturnino.

The moment passed, she sprang to her feet again, remembering her errand; alert, lithe, agile, wary even in her fatigue as any forest animal that watches for the hunters to spring away at the first sound it hears.

Saturnino went down the cliffs, and

passed the Arrone by a ford, and, giving La Storta a wide berth to his right, kept clear of the post road and passed by a path across the downs to Isola Farnese. He walked slowly now, being himself fatigued; she followed over the turf, a grey gliding figure, little noticeable, for the hood of her woollen mantle was drawn over her head. On these open fields she feared that he might turn his head and at a glance recognise her.

He did not ascend the cliff to Isola, but passed on beneath it, still keeping clear of the highway.

The 'Troy of Italy' lay behind them on its bare ground; but of this she knew nothing. Beyond that were the dark heights where the waters of Tivoli fall, and the snow-line of the Sabine range; in front stretched the Campagna, broken here into narrow ravines, and with scattered groves of trees, whose golden leafage caught the sunshine of the early day as the morning broadened behind the frozen summit of the Leonessa, and over the once sacred oaks of Eleusinian Musino.

To her they were but such long heaving mountain-lines, such hills, with barren sides

and wooded summits, such downs and moors, with the yellow dragon's-mouth, the amethyst-hued cyclamen, in their grass, as she had had always about her in autumn in Maremma. Even the tumuli and the tombs that often marked the way were familiar features in her home landscape. But that blue dome in the blue air afar off, that bell-flower which seemed to hang downwards from the floating clouds, that was new, strange, marvellous; that seemed to call her forward towards it, that seemed to say to her, 'hasten, hasten, here is the city of God.'

Only before her, between her and it, went the form of Saturnino like the shadow of Death.

When they left the glens and broken ground, and came out on the level turf of the Campagna nearer Rome, she was afraid that he would turn and see her. But he did not. He was walking a little lamely now, but with a dogged persistence, as if the thoughts with which he was accompanied would not let him delay or rest.

He knew very well that now he was going with open eyes straight into the jaws of danger, and his dread of capture was

much greater than his dread of death. He knew that at any moment a question put to him, a suspicion caused to any guard or soldier, might fling him back into the hands of the State. Away in the wild country he had been comparatively secure; but here, where perforce he must mingle with other men, and perforce pass the city barriers, he knew that at any moment the law might fall on him, and claim him. But he went on all the same, feeling every now and then for his dagger, which was hidden beneath his goatskin breeches.

A body of mounted carabinieri chanced to ride past, their horses' hoofs cutting deep into the wet Campagna turf; he turned quickly aside and hid himself behind a mound of tufa.

Turning, he saw her, but he saw in her only a peasant girl coming with her head hooded against the keen winds that were blowing up from the mouth of Tiber away in the west.

When the mounted patrol had trotted by and were lost to sight beyond a fringe of alders on the Valca's curve, he did not even think to look for her; a mere woman of the Campagna, as he thought, coming to the city as so many come.

He was absorbed in one terrible purpose, in one mission which was the only shape of duty that had ever guided his steps; its preoccupation obscured in him his usual wariness of eye and brain.

By this time it was afternoon, for he was footsore and walked slowly, and the ground was for the most part rough and heavy, and often encumbered with thorns and brambles and stones half sunken in the turf.

They met few living things; now and then an ox-cart came along the deep ruts in the turf; a birdcatcher spread his nets to snare the greenfinch and the goldfinch in the berried briony; a mountain lad went by playing on his pipes a melancholy hymn; a shepherd lay asleep amidst his nibbling flock, whilst his dog watched.

That was all.

They were now treading on what was once the *Via Cassia*, and they pursued it some little way; but in lieu of going on by it to the *Ponte Molle*, *Saturnino* crossed the green turf by paths he knew, and at length entered on a broad crowded public road, which once had been the great *Flaminian Way*. He deemed it less perilous to pass through the

gates with other men than to endeavour to enter the city secretly by any suspected means.

Her heart tightened as she saw him take the road.

It would be far more difficult to follow him in any highway or any street than it had been upon the downs and moors, where the clear air showed every figure on them as far as the human eye could reach in vision. Once in a street, a momentarily-gathering crowd, the passage of a waggon, the twist of any unknown passage, the barrier of a group of people, any unforeseen trifle, might take him from her sight, never, perhaps, to be found again in this great city which appalled her as she drew nigh it with its over-spreading walls and roofs, and palaces and cupolas and towers, and dusky piles of red-brown travertine, and gigantic churches that seemed to surge, colossal, from a petrified sea of stone.

Fear took the place of that exaltation which had sustained her sinking limbs so far : the nameless fear which comes on all free forest things when they are driven to approach a city.

She, like them, was bold so long as the

width of the green grasslands, of the heath-grown moors, was around her; as long as she possessed the lovely light of the unobscured skies, the wholesome wine of the strong wind, the fresh fragrance of the dewy soil.

But as she drew nigh this wilderness of stone, of brick, of marble, of iron, she saw no more the purple flower of the great dome: she only saw a labyrinth of men's making in which she would wander miserably; finding not her lover, and losing her hold upon his assassin.

A greater terror than that which she had felt in the prisons and judgment-chamber of Orbetello fell upon her. If she could not find Este, if she lost sight of this man bent on his destruction, what could she do? How could she warn him whom she would have given every drop of her life-blood to save?

The autumn day was drawing to a close; the splendour of sunset in November was beginning to lend its deeper gold, its darker blue, to the western heavens; the bells of Rome were rocking and beating on the air.

With that frost of fear on her heart, she followed Saturnino as he passed through

the wine-carts, the hay-waggon, the horses, the mules, the brawling men, the shouting children, about the gates of the Porta del Popolo. He had thrown his wallet aside when he had left Galera; he had nothing on him that the customs-guards could ask to examine. He passed them unnoticed; a tall, sinewy, black-browed, brown-cheeked shepherd, like so many that came down from the mountains, with their goats and asses, to go the round of the streets at daybreak.

She passed also; a slender, youthful figure, clad in homely homespun clothes.

She was in Rome.

She had walked sixty miles in five days.

She looked neither to right nor left.

She only watched the figure of Saturnino, towering a full head above the throngs through which his long stride passed.

Once only he paused; it was to go into a wineshop, and, under cover of drinking, ask the way to the palace that Este had inherited; the palace once of a Pope's mistress; a grand and gorgeous place, standing with its sculptured walls on a small piazza, dark and old, across the water on Trastevere. It had a wooded garden sloping to

the Tiber, as the Farnesina had. So they told him in the wine-shop, making clear to him the way that he should take.

His back was to the entrance-door as he drank, and paid, and spoke. She leaned against the lintel and listened, and heard.

She had believed all along that he came thither to kill Este; she heard without surprise the question that gave her confirmation of all she feared. What reason moved him, she wondered dully, while the pulse of her life beat in her as if every vein would burst.

She shrank back into the shadow of the wall as he came out. His face was dark with drink and passion; his lips were set. His eyes had a red fury in them, as an angered mastiff's have when he is about to spring.

Almost she was tempted to leap on him, and drive her dagger through him.

To save or serve Este any crime would have seemed to her holiness.

But she knew that beside him she was as a reed beside an oak; that if her first blow failed to strike home, he would turn in his rage, and stab or strangle her; then who would warn Este if she died?

She dared not touch him lest she should

fail, and no living thing be left betwixt her lover and him.

She continued to follow him, going through the strange ways of the wondrous place with no more sight of them than if she had been blind.

The noise of the streets, the confusion and babble, and sounds of moving horses, of soldiers' trumpets, of shouting charlatans, of rapidly-revolving wheels, all went by her unheard.

Her fear of the city was lost in a yet intenser fear. Had its streets been a furnace, she would have plunged into its flames.

Saturnino left the noisier and gayer streets to pass into the dark steep lanes that encompass the Pantheon and lead the way to Tiber. It seemed to her as if these miry, crooked, gloomy ways would never end; their rough uneven pavements, their battered darkling house-walls, their stench, and the cries that filled them from the brazen lungs of the populace thronging through them, made them seem to her like the passage-ways of hell. Yet she scarcely felt the flints under her feet, the foul smell in the air, the uproar on her ear; she was almost as sightless, almost

as deaf, as a hunted dog that runs straight on, hearing and seeing nought, made mad with terror.

Only mad she was not ; the great love in her burned too clearly like a strong light in a lamp of alabaster, and her courage made her calm.

Saturnino passed through the ancient ways that dive down through the heart of the city to the riverside. He crossed the Tiber by the bridge of S. Angelo. The sun had now set ; a crimson hue was upon all the scene ; the river rippled in lines of gold, the pine-trees were black against the glow, the angel on Hadrian's tomb lifted a flashing sword into the light.

Even in that moment the beauty of the evening upon Tiber forced some perception of itself upon her ; he never paused nor saw. He entered Trastevere.

Its streets and lanes were dark. Lamps were burning, and the glisten of fountains showed white through the gloom.

The great bells were tolling, for on the morrow it was the feast of S. Elizabeth. The air seemed to palpitate visibly with their rocking sounds. There were many monks and priests in the streets, their white or

their black robes flitting by beneath the shadow of high walls over-topped with orange-trees and cypress and here and there a palm. The people came out of their dim arched doorways, from under their iron lamps, with mass-books in their hands or long rosaries of olive-beads. From some church or monastery whose portals stood open there came a low subdued chorus of Gregorian chaunts swelling softly out over the evening air.

Saturnino neither noted nor paused for any of these things. He, a man of religion always, had for once no heed to the call of vespers, no salutation for the lighted altars. He pressed through the priesthood and the populace alike in haste and with feverish steps.

He still walked lamely, but he went fast, stopping in his course only to ask once or twice his way to the palace of the Count d'Este.

Once a brown-eyed Trasteverina with red laughing mouth heard him ask that, and smiled.

'A handsome youth and open-handed,' she said; 'he lives yonder where you see the statues on the roof; he led a mirthful life last winter, but he did not forget the

poor. He was away all summer at some pleasure, I suppose ; now he is back again ; yes, he is there ; he is not alone, he is never alone ; he is a gay gentleman, and handsome as a camellia-tree in carnival.'

Saturnino said nothing ; he slid his hand within his clothes to feel his dagger-hilt.

Musa was not near enough to hear the woman's words. She saw him change the direction of his steps, and she saw a dark grand pile, with a vast doorway and Gothic statues of saints along its roof, that stood at the further end of a narrow piazza, great trees of the gardens behind it making a black cloud against the evening sky. Then for a moment her eyes grew dim, her brain grew dizzy ; she felt that she was near Este.

And if she could not save him ! if she had chosen a foolish, useless way ! if she had erred when she had been afraid to strike her knife into his enemy's breast lest the blow should fail from any feebleness of her hand !

This was all she thought of ; that her lover had forgotten her she never remembered ; a great love is an unchanging pardon. Strained to the uttermost it will not fail or faint ; it will endure all things.

She quickened her steps, and, trusting

to the deep shadows that fell from the house walls of the piazza, crept close upward to him, so close that stretching out her hand she could have touched him.

He, knowing nothing still, went on across the pavement of the narrow square. No one noticed him ; shepherds came in oftentimes from the Campagna on the vigil of holy feasts, and he, they saw, was from the downs and moors, with his rude goatskin clothes, his wild dark hair, his pastoral staff, his leather-girt strong loins.

The oaken iron-studded doors of the palace stood wide open ; there was a keeper of them, clad in red and gold, like all such servitors of Roman princes, but he had crossed the piazza for a moment, and was quenching his thirst at a canteen, where some of the Swiss guard of the adjacent Vatican were lolling and drinking in his company, their yellow and red uniforms and the steel glitter of their halberds making a glow of colour under an old bronze swinging lamp.

She gave the men-at-arms a swift glance, and felt glad that they were so near : if she failed they would be there to hear.

She crept up closely towards Saturnino, so closely that she walked in his very shadow.

Her footfall was noiseless. He did not know that he was followed ; that he had thus been followed all across the wastes of the Maremma.

He passed without a moment's pause through the doorway ; whenever he had struck a deathblow, he had always struck quickly as the eagle does.

Within there was a vast and lofty hall, austere with sculpture, its floor mosaic, its ceiling frescoed ; a staircase of immense width, made of marble, stretched upward between walls of marble ; silver lamps swung from above and lighted it dully. It was deserted and silent ; all the footmen dozed in Roman fashion, in the antechambers before the great apartments up above where the first flight of the great stairs ended, and where, in a great arch within the wall, a statue of S. Michael stood, colossal, with white wings outspread and spear uplifted.

Saturnino crossed the hall and mounted one by one the steps of marble.

Once he looked back to be sure that no one saw him there. She shrank against the pillars of the balustrade, and her grey clothes were so like the shadows on her that she escaped his sight.

All around the landing-place there were

large doors, black doors touched with faded gilding ; there were oil lamps burning, their pale light fell on the marble of S. Michael, with the fiend conquered at his feet.

By hazard Saturnino flung open the nearest door to him, and thrust back the curtain of gilded leather that hung behind it. The chamber within was an antechamber, spacious, but well warmed by a bronze brazier in its centre ; here several lacqueys in liveries of purple and white were lounging at their ease in idleness.

Some stared, some started up at sight of the strange figure of this Campagna shepherd, as he looked to them, standing on the threshold, with one hand putting back the gilded Cordovan leather of the curtain.

He called to them in a loud voice : ‘ Go, tell your master I am here ; I, Saturnino Mastarna. Say that I bid him for old friendship’s sake come out for a word with me.’

There was something in his tone, something in his look, which awed into silence the arrogant and impudent words with which they were always ready to greet and turn away one of the populace ; to them, all Roman youngsters as they were, the name

that was still a sacred name to the Maremma, said nothing, but they were impressed and cowed by the rude majesty, the lordly, haughty command, of this strange man, who spoke to them as though he were an emperor.

They whispered amongst each other in hesitation and vague alarm. He stood on the threshold waiting and impatient, his great dark eyes glowing with flame beneath his bent and stormy brows.

‘Go,’ he said again to them, ‘Go ; your master and I kept company for two long years until we sawed each other’s chains asunder. Go ; I am Saturnino Mastarna.’

Two of them slunk away upon his errand, the others waited about alarmed.’

Behind the leathern curtain Musa stood, within a hand’s-breadth of her father. Her heart beat so loudly against her breast that she thought he must hear it, and would turn and see her there. Her whole being was strung to tension, all the blood had gone out of her face, tongues of flame seemed to dart through her eyes, her lips grew dry and parched. In the agony of her watching fear she almost forgot that her sight would soon see Este. If she failed to save him!—this was her one consuming thought.

It seemed to her hours that she stood there, on the threshold of the vestibule, waiting, whilst the idle lacqueys loitered within, looking at this strange unbidden guest with stupid curiosity and amaze. She heard a clock striking the seventh hour of the night; she saw the hand of Saturnino steal within his belt of leather, and knew that he was fingering the dagger hidden there.

The doors at the upper end of the long frescoed chamber unclosed; Este came through them, the light from the swinging lamps fell on his classic face. He looked surprised, disturbed; he came across the floor with a rapid step, and motioned back his eager lacqueys.

‘Are you prudent?’ he said in a low tone. ‘I have not forgotten, I will befriend you, but what brings you here?’

Saturnino cut his words asunder.

‘This!’ he said; and swift as the lightning flash above his mountain lair his dagger flashed in the air.

Ere it could strike she had thrown herself on him, and with the strength of a young lioness had torn the steel out of his grip, and forced him, staggering like a drunken man, against the marble columns of the doorway.

‘You too!’ cried Este; and all his debt, and all his sins of oblivion and ingratitude, came back upon him like a rain of curses, and held him dumb and paralysed.

‘I would not have come,’ she murmured, careless that the blood was streaming from the hand with which she had seized the dagger, and still clenched it close; ‘I would not have come—oh never, never—but he meant to kill you, and I have followed him all the way, all the way.’

Then she dropped senseless on the marble floor at his feet.

Saturnino stood silent, leaning against the columns of the door.

The veins of his throat and his forehead were black and swollen, his dark face was crimson, the blood was surging in his temples and in his brain; he only saw a crimson reeling mist that circled round and round him; the servants seized him and he felt them not; he saw nothing, he knew nothing; only one memory remained with him.

‘She was the child of Serapia,’ he muttered, ‘and you—you—you—you will escape me!’

He strove to wrench himself free from the grasp of the men who held him; he

strove blindly, madly, to get away and throw himself on Este ; but he could see nothing, he could hear nothing, for the rush of blood in his brain ; the darkness over him grew denser and blacker, the sense of suffocation grew worse, he thought the hands of a hundred men were at his throat ; then, like the carcass of a slaughtered bull, his body slipped from those who had seized him, and he fell face forward on the floor.

He breathed a few times with labour, but his brain was already dead ; soon the trunk and the limbs were dead also. The silver image that Joconda had given to him still hung about his throat.

So he perished, unpitied, unassuiled, and they let him lie like carrion, and to be like carrion carted to the streets.





CHAPTER XLI.

WHEN she returned to any consciousness and sense of sight or hearing, she was alone with her faithless lover; he knelt beside her as he had kneeled on that night of storm when he had found her on the shore beneath the Sasso Scritto.

‘Forgive me, forgive me!’—that was all he could think of to say.

He loathed his sins, and he abhorred himself.

Little by little she recovered breath and power and remembrance; she had only swooned from long fatigue and terror, and the effort made to save him.

For awhile she lay quite still, letting the deep delight of his touch, his voice, his

presence, steep all her being in unutterable, dream-like ecstasy.

‘My love, my love!’ she murmured, and smiled, and leaned her head against his breast, and was at peace at last.

He kissed her again and again and again, and in that moment loved her and said only the same words, ‘Forgive me! forgive me!’ and then was still and leaned his lips upon her hair in silence.

For awhile she rested so; so motionless he might have thought her dead but for the close clinging pressure of her unwounded hand on his.

She lay as in a trance: a trance of more than mortal joy.

Suddenly a great fear seized her.

‘Saturnino,’ she murmured, ‘where is he?’

‘He is gone, dear; never mind him,’ he answered her. He could not bear to tell her that this man was dead.

‘Gone—gone where? He may come back. He may try to kill you. He hates you; I cannot tell why——’

She had started from his hold and was trembling with terror. Este shuddered with his own memories.

He had understood the dying words of Saturnino : he had understood that this poor brute had been her father.

‘He is gone where he will harm no one any more,’ he said to her, with tears in his own eyes. ‘He is dead, dear. He had a rush of blood over the brain that killed him. Let us leave him to God.’

‘Is he dead?’ she said ; but it moved her little. He had been nothing to her, this outlawed man, who first had stolen her gold and last had striven to slay the only life she loved. She had pitied him because men had hunted him ; that was all.

Suddenly again she raised herself and looked in Este’s eyes, and a wave of hot colour went over all her face.

‘My child died,’ she murmured timidly as if afraid he would rebuke her.

‘Yours !—mine !’

A great pang of remorse went through him. Had she suffered thus, he knowing nothing, living in pleasure and in oblivion !

‘Ours,’ she said softly under her breath. ‘He lived a few little days ; I did all I could.’

Her eyes closed, and large tears rolled slowly off her lashes and fell upon his hand.

He kissed them as they fell; a poignant repentance made him ready to curse himself, though she would never curse him.

‘I would not have come,’ she murmured, ‘you know that; you are sure of that? Only I feared he wished to hurt you, and I could warn you no other way. Oh love, oh my dear love! you do believe me? Never, never would I have come to remind you of—of——’

‘Of my debt,’ he murmured. ‘Ah, I believe! You are the most generous and the most pure of living souls, and I am the most base.’

‘No, no,’ she said softly, ‘I am nothing; it was natural you should forget. You have the world now; you have no need of me. Never would I have come for any lesser thing than this.’

‘How do you live?’ he said, with his voice broken and hoarse.

He was ashamed; greatly ashamed.

‘I live as we did,’ she said simply, and thought she would not tell him of all her sufferings, lest he should hear in them a reproach.

‘In the tombs? In those tombs still?’

‘Where else?’ she said in wonder that he should ask.

‘When I drink from what you called the *skyphos* that you drank out of,’ she added simply, ‘it seems almost as if you kissed me still——’

He leaned his face upon her breast to hide his shame.

‘Whatever was I that you should adore me thus?’ he cried. ‘Nothing to you but a bringer of burden and shame.’

‘I love you,’ she murmured, with her old trouble at finding any words large enough to tell the great emotions that swelled her heart. Who that loves can ever find them?

She loved him, indeed, and he——

A passionate remorse was on him. Why had he been faithless, treacherous, more thankless than a cur that bit what fed it? Nay, he thought, no beast but what was human could ever have been ingrate thus.

Suddenly she freed herself from his embrace, and raised herself erect upon her couch.

‘I will go now,’ she said, all her soul in her eyes as they dwelt on his. ‘I have saved you, I have seen you; night and day

I will thank God. I will go now ; I am not tired. I shall be always there, and if you wish for me ever, you will call me. But that will not be.'

Her eyes were full of tears which did not fall. She put her arms about his throat and kissed him, as though he lay dying, and was leaving her for evermore.

'My love—my love—my love!' she murmured.

Then she rose ; her face was very pale, her head swam, her limbs trembled still, her hand was wounded and wrapped in linen, and throbbed and ached, but she was ready to go.

He should not think that she had come to call him back to any memory of his debt, or of her sacrifice.

The old heroic light shone in her eyes, the old high courage rose in her heart. She would go back and live in solitude and silence, and if he wished for her he knew the way over the wild thyme and the dewy wood-moss to the moors. She would be always there.

Perhaps some day, when the world had tired him, or strength had failed him, he would remember.

Este held her to his breast.

‘You must not go!’ he cried passionately. ‘You must never go! What do you think me? Could ever we part now? If I had known——’

Then he was silent; a cruel knowledge was in his mind, a cruel dilemma beset him; he remembered other ties, other passions. She loved him as no other did indeed, but he——

The tapestry at the further wall of the great painted chamber in which they were alone wavered and moved; a hand pushed it with petulance aside; from the gloom behind it there came a woman as white as the swan’s throat is, with hair that was about her like a golden nimbus, and a collar of old jewels set in silver at her throat. She moved with calm, slow, undulating grace; she wore some soft and shining texture, white, too, with lights and shadows in it as the swan’s whiteness has; she had a knot of crimson roses at her breast.

She had cruel eyes. She had a beautiful mouth, that laughed as children’s do. She came forward and looked, smiling, at Este.

She was only a base, venal, wanton thing enough, who had but one love, gold; yet the

world had taught her all its sorcery, and she had its grace, its skill, its power. She was the Venus Pandemos which in all time has triumphed.

She put her hand upon his shoulder, and laughed a little, noiselessly.

She glanced at the poor grey, dust-stained, travel-tired form that she saw there.

‘He is mine,’ she said with a smile. ‘Was he yours once? Well! why have you let him go?’

He shivered under the hold of the courtesan, but he said nothing. His head drooped; he was ashamed, bitterly ashamed.

He envied that dead carrion which lay in the lower chamber of his palace. He, at least, living, had been a man.

Musa stood mute; her eyes fastened on this beautiful soulless white and golden thing that held him there.

Then all at once she understood.

With one cry she turned and fled.

When he shook off his sorceress, and followed her down his great marble stairs into the darkness of the night, she was gone: lost to him in the wilderness of Rome.

Then perhaps, at last, he loved her.



CHAPTER LXII.

ON the sixth day from that she reached her home. She knew not how she reached it: knew no more than does the hunted beast, that runs panting, sinking, almost dying at each step, and yet runs on to die at home. She had no consciousness of what she did; her hand bled, her brain turned, her feet stumbled, yet she kept on, with only that one instinct of the stricken doe left in her, to reach her home and die there.

She lost all beauty, all youth, all likeness of herself. She crept on with the torpid movement of old age; in her heart she carried its despair.

Everywhere around her, in the buoyant clouds, in the mountain snows, in the green-

ness of the land, in the light and lustre of the sunbeams, she saw only one thing, the face of the woman who had robbed her; of the woman who was by his side, with the noiseless laugh on her mouth and the glisten of the old gems at her throat.

That was all she saw.

The few men who met her in the fields and on the moors were frightened at her look, and thought her mad, and hurried from her path.

For six days and nights she wandered, now running, now creeping, now dropping and lying like a stone, now gathering herself up and going onward as a deer does that carries a mortal wound with him through the brake and the stream, over the hill and the heath.

Sometimes she slept.

Sometimes all night she lay with eyes wide open to the stars, staring, wondering where God was.

On the seventh morning she came home.

There were redbreasts singing amidst the myrtle. She went down into the tombs. They were very cold; the ashes of the spent fire were on the stones.

In the ivory skyphos he had always used

there was water; she drank it thirstily. She kissed the rim his lips had used to touch. She kneeled down and said a Latin prayer. 'If God care,' she thought—and wondered dully.

The little timid song of the mountain birds came into the stillness of the tombs.

She did not hear it; she only heard Este's voice.

She took from her girdle the three-edged dagger that he had once worn near his heart night and day; she set it upright in the spot where the little child had lain upon its bed of rosemary, forcing the hilt down into a crevice in the rock floor of the chamber of the Lucumo.

Then she threw herself forward on the upright blade, which sank straight through breast and bone.

When the messengers of her lover came thither a day later, having sought her in the city and on the downs and hills in vain, she lay as though asleep, face downward, her head upon her arm.

He made her grave there, and buried with her half his life.

But men forget—and he forgot.

In time the wild olive, and the myrtle,

and the evergreen alaternus grew closer and closer around the entrance of the Etruscan grave, and at last wove so impenetrable a veil between it and the light that even the wild birds and the hunted hare seeking a refuge could not enter there.

It defended her in death as it had sheltered her in life; and the woodlark sang above amidst the woodspurge, and the balm and the spikenard and the wild rose grew over the place of the tomb.

THE END.

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